

When Stars Collide

by Serendipity

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Summary: When a lonely hacker helps an angel get back his soul, she soon finds she might lose her heart in the bargain.

(updated/reposted) Chapters have been consolidated.

1. Part 1

NEW AUTHOR'S NOTE: Hello, Here's another repost of an older story that has been slightly revised. I'd like to think I've improved as a writer since finishing this, but I'm keeping editing to a minimum to preserve the tone of the original (seeing a progression is important for me). This fic is older and unrelated to my other Willow/Angel story Protector, but, unlike Protector, it is complete. Lastly, I want to say that this update is for Keeny, who so kindly recommended it in the first place. S

> E-MAIL: trekchic2001@yahoo.com
 SUMMARY: Willow helps Angel get his soul back, making her life all the more
> complicated.
 DIST/ARCHIVE: Ask and you shall receive!
> DISCLAIMER: Willow, Angel, Amy Madison, Buffy, Xander, Giles and everyone else
 don't belong to me, they belong to Joss Whedon and Mutant Enemy. No, really, they do...
> ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is NOT a songfic, but I want to note that the title of this story comes from lyrics from the Elton John song, "The One" I wrote it WELL before the season 3 premiere and the Becoming mess so it's right around SurpriseInnocence. Consider it an alternative universe, if you will, where the events of the rest of season 2 (like the finale Becoming) and season 3 never took place...

* * *

> <p>His vision blurred. <p>

The first thing he noticed was the immense pain in his side. Next

came the even greater pain in his chest. He gritted his teeth.

The old, familiar ache was back.

Blinking to clear his sight, he tried to sit up, but felt something restraining his arms and legs.

> He struggled weakly against his bounds but knew it was futile. Then the inevitable happened. <p>

He started to cry.

Leaning back against the hard wooden surface, he proceeded to sob helplessly, drowning in the

> frighteningly vivid memories which were both his own and utterly foreign at the same time. <p>

His bindings were rapidly loosened and he lifted his head.

"A-angel?"

The meekness of the question only worsened his pain. Blinking again to clear the tears from his eyes, he tried to get a good look at his capture. The figure was blurry and completely indistinguishable except for one thing.

Red.

"A-are you okay?"

The blur took a step closer and suddenly he realized he hadn't answered her first question. Pulling himself up into a seated position, he flinched slightly when she retreated a few steps.

"Willow? It's...it's me...."

He heard her let out a strange little gasping sound, almost like a choked sob. Her reaction was enough to send him into tears all over again. He buried his face in his hands in embarrassment.

"Oh Angel!"

She leaped onto the table with him, hugging him fiercely while they both cried.

"Angel, you're back, you're back..." she murmured repeatedly while rocking him soothingly back and forth.

He shook his head again trying to get away.

It was terrible. The visions of how he'd attacked Willow. The bloodlust. The way he'd gripped her neck with every intention of draining her.

He remembered how he'd pursued Ms. Calendar...the adrenaline thrill it gave him to see the terror in her eyes...the snap her neck made when it broke. He could recall the smell of her cool skin as he laid her out on Giles' bed and the feel of the roses he scattered on the watcher's floor. But most vividly, he recalled the look of pain and

betrayal in Buffy's eyes as she fought him. He'd never forget how thin and pale she was when she was in the hospital and how he'd had every intention of using that against her. It made him sick. They'd never forgive him. Never speak to him again.

Not that he could blame them.

"Willow..I-I'm so sorry...I-I..Ms. Calendar..she's..Oh God, I have to get out of here..."

> pushing her away gently, he tried to wipe the tears away and limped towards the door. <p>

"Angel! No, Angel, it's almost daylight, you can't go home through there!" she pounced off the table and ran to follow him.

"I know," his voice sounded harsh and rough.

Not quite comprehending, she opened her mouth to respond but suddenly the truth hit her.

> 'He knew'? He WANTED to die? The realization was slow and odd. He intended to commit suicide. A numb sensation invaded her body as she. He was going to purposefully go out into the sunlight one last time and kill himself. How..sad. How..poetic. How....stupid. It was then that something strange happened. <p>

She got mad.

"What?!"

He jumped slightly at her high pitched shriek.

"You WHAT?!"

He was somewhat taken aback by her reaction.

"I just spent the last five hours anchoring your soul to your body and you WHAT?"

"Willow, please, just let me g-,"

"I don't THINK so," suddenly, she was on a roll. She was furious and tired, not to mention injured both emotionally as well as physically. And she was not going to take it any more. "Do NOT make me forcibly knock you out and drag you back to your apartment, Angel," she put her hands on her hips in classic Cordelia style, " I am NOT going to let you die, do you hear me? Do you have any idea what I went through to get you here?"

Unfortunately, he did. He knew only too well. "Willo-,"

"Angel, you have to FIGHT! Are you listening to me?"

Willow Rosenberg: motivational speaker, that's who she was.

"Buffy needs you! We all need you, w-what happened these past few weeks, that wasn't you," she tried to reason with him, "That was something else, some horrible thing which is never coming back. I made sure of that, and I'm not letting you waste this, Angel, I-I'm just not..." Her voice broke towards the end but she managed to keep her eyes hard and demanding. Without the involuntary trembling of her

chin, it might have actually been convincing.

He shook his head in a show of resignation. He was tired. So very, very tired, "Willow, it's for the best, please, try and understand." With that he turned towards the door and walked out into the hall.

Without even thinking she bounded out after him and leaped into the air, tackling him from behind.

"Wi-, OW!" he shouted as she grabbed two fistfuls of his hair and pulled him down to the ground with her.

"You are NOT leaving here, got it?" she growled through clenched teeth.

He stared up on her in shock. What had happened to the meek, shy, passive girl he had known mere weeks before? Little Willow Rosenberg had seriously grown up on those past few weeks. Thanks, in a large part, to him. This fact put him in a very awkward and troubled position.

And he knew it.

So there they were, with her hovering breathlessly above and him lying flat on his back below. They stared at each other unwaveringly as a true battle of wills took place. She bit her lip in frustration and narrowed her eyes for effect. He kept his face completely blank except for the occasional wince when she readjusted her grip on his hair.

Neither could help but wonder exactly how they'd gotten into this position to begin with...

Part 1

Her lungs felt like they were going to spontaneously combust.

She rounded yet another corner, slipping slightly on the polished linoleum as she raced for the
> red sign marked exit. That sign was her only hope. <p>

"Wiiiiiiilloooooowww???"

She was stupid to have tried this alone, she knew that now. She had been especially naive to think he wouldn't sense what she was doing and come after her.

"Wiiiillow? Ooooh Wiiiiiiiillllloooooowww...come out come out wherever you are..."

The pure evil inherent in his voice caused shivers to run up her spine.

"Aw, come on, Wills, come out and play."

His voice sounded so close. Gasping, she urged her legs onwards,

terrified out of her mind. She was completely defenseless ever since the scuffle in the library which preceeded her hasty exit. During it, he'd caused her to drop her cross and stake.

She rapidly approached the doors. Reaching, she slammed into the metal bar, shoving it in with all her might, praying for it to give. It stuck fast.

Locked. Oh no...locked...oh God... Tears filling her eyes, she turned just in time to see him launch right into her, a satisfied snarl on his game face.

She shrieked and ducked, somehow managing to dodge his body as it hit the door full force, denting it. She rapidly crawled past him and took off running the way she'd come. She heard him grunt as he picked himself up and raced after her.

"Naughty, naughty, naughty...."

Squeezing her eyes shut, she raced through the blackness, willing that awful voice away. I wonder if this is what Ms. Calendar felt just before he killed her...

She'd give anything to see Buffy standing at the end of the darkened hallway, stake in hand, poised and ready to kill. But that wasn't going to happen. Buffy was gone, out of town for the weekend. Neither Giles nor Xander knew she was here. And there wasn't any chance that they'd happen upon her or even wonder where she was. Giles was at a Watcher's meeting and Xander was out with Cordelia. At the time, the fact that she'd be alone made this night seem perfect to attempt the ritual. Now she knew it had been complete stupidity on her part. He had found out somehow. He'd most likely felt the soul preparing to re-enter. It didn't take a genius to figure out who was responsible or where they'd be. Nevertheless, he'd caught her completely off guard, especially because she'd been so close..so very close to completeing the ritual. Just a few more seconds and she'd > have finished it. <p>

And none of this would be happening.

"Aw, c'mon Wills, you've gotta play NICE," on that final word he pounced, knocking her off her feet.

Survival instinct kicked in fiercely and she shoved him away with all her strength, while turning and pushing herself upwards on her hands and knees, her feet scrambling to get a firm grip on the floor.

"Nope, Willow, I think that's a bad idea."

Calmly, he reached out and grabbed her long red hair, dragging her down. She screamed repeatedly and he flipped her over easily, straddling her hips.

"Tsk tsK tsK, Willow, you've really gotta stop (bang) doing (bang) that (bang)."

To accentuate each word, he slammed her head into the floor, causing her vision to grow foggy. He stared at her thoughtfully before smiling again.

"Ya know," he began conversationally, "I've been pretty lonely since Darla, and well, Dru, in case you hadn't noticed, is a bit of a..how shall I put this?" he paused, pretending to look for the right word, "nutball." He shot her a charming smile, "So, I was wondering, Willow. How would you feel about keeping me company for the next couple of centuries?"

She moaned weakly.

"Good!" he leaned in closer to her, "Cause I have a real thing for red-heads," he murmured seductively into her ear.

Her eyes widened and she struggled against him again.

"Aw, c-mon," he started laughing, "it'll be f-,"

She spit in his face.

His eyes immediately darkened and he pinned her arms down harshly on either side of her head, immediately cutting off circulation at her wrists.

"Or I could just kill you, you little bitch, it's your choice," he snarled angrily

"A-angel, please," she gazed at him fearfully, "I know you're in there....please Angel, fight this..."

Angelus just smiled wider, "Yeah, keep trying, you stup-," suddenly, his smile froze and he squeezed his eyes shut, as if in pain.

"N-no...NO.." he howled in anger. His face shifted back to human and he looked up at her.

"Willow? Is that you?" he asked cautiously in clear eyed confusion, "Willow, what's going on?"

"Angel?" she gasped.

"Nope, just kidding," he burst out laughing and his face shifted back to its boney grimace. He backhanded her viciously, splitting her lip and causing it to bleed painfully, "God, Willow, for one of the "smart" kids, you're really really dumb."

"Bastard!!" she shouted at the top of her lungs in pure frustration.

"My goodness!! Such language!" Angelus stared at her in mock-horror before laughing again.

That did it.

She forced herself to meet his gaze boldly, and began to calm her irregular breathing. She was as good as dead, provided he didn't turn her into a vampire. She knew that. But it was odd how different people confront death. It felt like all the terror had ebbed out of her body in these last few seconds as she gazed at him with silent, calm fury. She felt numb but resigned to her fate. And she wasn't

going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm anymore.

"Go ahead, Angelus. I'm ready."

He furrowed his brow and looked at her, first in surprise and then in disappointment, "Aww, but now you're not playing the game..."

"Sorry," she muttered darkly.

"Oh, well, that's okay. The games over anyway..." with that, he leaned over, fangs bared, "Welcome to eternity, Willow...."

"Get away from her you jerk!"

Both predator and prey snapped up to stare at the unexpected intruder.

Angelus frowned as he took in the slender, blond teenager, totally unimpressed, "Who the hell are you?"

Amy?! Willow's mind was completely in turmoil What on earth??

She smiled at him, her normally green eyes glowing a soft white, "Get off of her, asshole."

Angelus smiled back, recognition flickering over his features, "Oh yes, now I remember, you're Sabrina the Teenage Witch, right? With the psycho mom...yeah. Look, hon, tell ya what, I'll finish here and then we can play together. I'll even give you a head start," he nodded at her charitably, "Go on now. Shoo."

Amy silently cocked her head to one side.

He turned his attention back to Willow, "Now, where were we?" he plunged forward again.

She gritted her teeth.

He was an inch away from her neck when a pulse of liquid yellow light hit him from the side, knocking him off of her.

Angelus fell into the wall, slightly stunned. He stared up at the blond girl in shock.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Amy smiled smugly, "I *told* you to get away from her, you arrogant son of a b-,"

Snarling, he picked himself up and leaped. Swiftly, she held her hands out in front, thumbs and forefingers joined to complete a circle. Before he could get within two feet of where she was standing, another pulse of light shot out and hit him square in the head, fiercely knocking him back into the wall. He slowly slid down, unconscious.

Willow almost cried with relief. She pulled herself up on her hands and knees, crawling away from the vampire's prone form.

"Are you alright?" Amy asked, crouching beside her.

"Yes, thanks so much Amy...you have..umm..really good aim...and timing" it was then that the red-head noticed her friend's odd clothing. Her hair was slightly mussed and she was wearing a flannel night shirt over her jeans.

"Umm..aren't you gonna stake him or something, Willow?" she darted a nervous glance at Angelus,
> "It's really gonna suck if he wakes up, especially since I-," she stopped suddenly and leaned heavily against the wall for balance. <p>

"Amy? You're shaking..."

"I-I guess I'm just not used to knocking out homicidal vampires, sorry, just give me a second," she shook her head slowly, "It's going to take me at least a week to recharge after this one..."

"Out of curiosity, how did you know I was here?"

"Oh," she took a deep breath and smiled, "Well, this is going to sound really weird..."

"Amy, we live on the Hellmouth, I doubt that."

"I dreamt it."

"Dreamt it? Like, had a vision?"

"Something like that. I was asleep and it was like I was having a nightmare but it was so real. When I woke up, something told me that it **was** real. I just threw some clothes on and raced here as fast as I could."

Willow nodded thoughtfully.

"Nothing like this has ever happened before either," Amy continued, "It was very strange, it felt almost like I was here, watching you get chased."

"Well, you've obviously gotten pretty powerful these past few months, maybe that has something to do with it."

"Yes, but I've still got my limits. If I over-exert myself doing something," she glanced at Angelus, "It takes me awhile to get back up to full strength."

"You should really consider talking to Giles about this. Actually, I've been doing some extremely fascinating research on Techno-paganism and I've found some stuff you might be interested in," she broke off from her blissful chatter when Angelus groaned softly, "actually, we should probably do something about **him** first."

Slowly, Willow stood and walked over to the vampire's body, "We can't kill him, not after I've been trying to save him for so long and especially not after everything he's done for all of us. We need to get him back the library somehow."

"What are you going to do?"

"Anchor his soul to his body. Permanently."

"ALONE?!"

"Well, yes, unless you're interested in helping out."

Amy sighed softly, "Hey, why not? It's only a school night. I only have an exam tomorrow at 8am," she rolled her eyes but grinned, "Besides, sleep is highly overrated."

Willow smiled and turned her attention back to Angel's tall, well-muscled form, "I..uhh...don't suppose you have enough power left to 'zap' us there by any chance?"

Amy shook her head, "I couldn't get him three feet down the hall on what power I have left."

Willow bit her lip in frustration and shrugged. "Well, I guess we'll have to do this the old fashioned way," she reached down and grabbed one of his arms.

The other girl sighed. Grunting, she stood up, walked over and grabbed the other. Carefully, they began to drag the body down the corridor.

"He had SO better appreciate this," she muttered under her breath.

Willow smiled, "Oh, he will, Amy, he will."

Part 2

"Willow, let go of my hair."

"No."

"Willow, Don't be unreasonable!!!"

"*I'm* being unreasonable?" she spat, "Explain how *I'm* the unreasonable one when
> *you're* the person trying to commit suicide!" <p>

He paused. She had a point.

"Angel, I'll let you go on one condition. You give me your word you won't try and kill yourself."

"I....can't..."

"Fine then. We stay here."

He cursed softly under his breath. He could very easily get away from her, but was taking extra-careful precautions not to hurt anyone. Especially after everything that had happened.

"Willow, you're probably the only person on earth who feels this way,

do you realize that? D-do you realize that if Xander or Giles were here, they probably would have staked me hours ag-,"

"They're just mad, Angel, they'll get over it. They'll come to understand that it *wasn't* y-,"

"But it *was* me, Willow. Angelus is Angel. We can't be separated, we can't be differentiated, *never* make the mistake o-,"

"You *are* different, Angel. I don't care what you say. There is a very big difference between
> you and Angelus. How can you even imply that there isn't? I can't believe that y-," <p>

"Willow, I live with the demon every day of my life. You don't know. You don't understand. You can't. That demon is an inextricable part of who I a-,"

"*Angel* is in control of the demon. Angelus is not. There's your difference. Don't argue this with me Angel, you're gonna lo-,"

"It isn't a question of winning or losing, Willow. This is for the best. My dying will end the misery I've inflicted on ev-,"

"*Angelus* inflicted-,"

"*I* inflicted!!! If I die now, Giles, Xander, Buffy and you can live on in peace. Do you have any idea how much pain it'll cause Buffy if I just come sauntering back into her life? As if I haven't hurt her enough that she has to live with this additional burden? Things can never be the same between us. And my even existing will always be this awful unspoken request for us to be together. I can't do that to her. I can't cause her that kind of stre-,"

"Oh, so killing yourself is the better option?" She was furious, "you think that if Buffy finds out that I restored your soul and then you committed suicide that THAT wouldn't kill her even more? Do you realize how much your death will haunt her for the rest of her lif-"

"Please, let me die in peace. I can't face everyone after what I've done, especially Buf-,"

"Don't be such a coward, Angel," she whispered coldly.

Her final words left him speechless. Incredible rage built up within him and he growled dangerously. Shifting, he prepared to break her hold and to end this childishness once and for all.

It was then that she took that opportunity to scare the living daylights out of him.

He watched in horror as her face suddenly crumpled, "I'm sorry, Angel. I-I didn't mean that."

He blinked as her unexpectedly warm tears began to fall on his forehead.

She let go of his hair, drawing away slightly.

"I just..I-I just know I can't *force* you to stay. I'm not Buffy and I'm not a slayer and I'm not strong. I'm just me. And I know that's not alot and I know that's not nearly enough but..It's just that...it's just that it's been so scary and lonely without you here, Angel. Buffy's been so sad and she's been isolating herself from everyone and ever since Xander and Cordelia started dating..I-I've been so alone. And I never realized how much I missed you until you came back and now you want to go again and I don't know what to do."

In one split second, she had gone from an angry, demanding force to be reckoned with, to a frightened, vulnerable 16-year old who was gawky, lonely, and felt completely out of place.

Just like him.

And then she did the one thing that would change his mind forever.

"I've missed you so much Angel. Please don't leave me again...please don't leave *us* again. We all need you. I need you."

She stared into his eyes the way that only she could: with such sincerety and innocence that he felt his own heart breaking.

He sat there, staring back at her, still in mild shock. Numbly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a green silken handkerchief.

She accepted it gratefully and blew her nose.

He never *did* understand women. Even after over 200 years, they somehow always managed to completely shock him at the strangest moments. They had this uncanny ability to constantly keep him guessing. He never quite knew what they were planning on doing nex-

Suddenly, she threw herself into his arms.

He fell back slightly, before recovering his balance. Holding her awkwardly at first, he gradually grew more comfortable with it. It was definitely strange. Not quite the same as holding Buffy when she was upset. Buffy was strong. He always knew she'd snap back, no matter what was thrown at her. She was the slayer. Willow, on the other hand was much more fragile. Easily broken. She'd need someone to protect her.

"Angel?"

"Hmm?" he responded absent-mindedly stroking her hair.

"That was really embarrassing. I'm sorry." She drew away from him and he could see that although her eyes were still red and somewhat puffy, she was better.

Hmm..maybe not so fragile after all... "No, you shouldn't be embarrassed by it, Willow. Anyway, this was my fault not yours. I should be the one apologizing," he sighed heavily, "for a lot of things."

She sat across from him, staring silently at her hands.

Dim light was already beginning to filter through the hallway. "Let's get you home."

She looked up in surprise, "D-does that mean that you're staying?"

He managed a weak smile, "Yes, I guess it does."

"OH Angel I could just kiss you now!!" she shouted jubilantly, but quickly blushed when she saw his eyes widen in surprise, "B-but i won't...because those are the kind of urges you..umm..repress.." she finished meekly.

He smiled kindly to ease her embarrassment, "C'mon, let's go, we don't have much time if we want to make it to the boiler room and down to the tunnels."

"Okay, but I need to clean up the library first. If I don't, Giles will know that I-," she stopped abruptly as if she'd just said something she wasn't supposed to.

Angel's eyes narrowed in understanding. "Wait, Giles didn't know you were doing this?"

She considered lying, but quickly dropped that idea, "No," she admitted weakly.

Well, aren't we just full of surprises? He furrowed his brow and gave her an odd look before shrugging, "Okay, we'll deal with that later. First, I'll help you clean up and then we'll get out of here," he responded simply.

Willow nodded and breathed a sigh of relief.

They stood and walked back towards the library.

"So," he began conversationally, "Xander and Cordelia, huh?"

"Yeah."

He didn't miss the slightly disappointed and disgusted tone in her voice.

"Wait..I had nothing to do with that, right? I didn't drive them together or something, did I?"

Despite herself, Willow giggled, "No, no you didn't, Angel."

He paused to hold the door open, "Thank goodness."

"Why, what do you think of them as a couple?" she asked, walking past him into the library.

He paused, searching for the right words while the door slammed shut behind them, its hollow thud echoing down the empty hall.

>

Part 3

Closing her locker, Willow sighed heavily, closed her eyes and leaned her head against

> the cool metal. The last few weeks absolute torture. The sheer burden of what she knew had robbed her of several hours of sleep each night. Today she'd not only fallen asleep in math class AND in history, but she'd also had to continue to blatantly lie to all of her friends. She'd almost lost it a few days ago when Buffy had caught her between classes and asked her if she'd been sleep deprived lately. Faking a sudden allergic reaction, she'd run and hid in the bathroom until the bell rang. It had been two full weeks since she'd changed Angel. It was hard to believe that she'd been able to keep it a secret for so long. She'd had to basically cut off all connection to her friends in order to manage, Not that they really noticed. but she'd done it. She sighed sadly. Yes, recently her life had been full of guilt and close calls, but she'd somehow managed to emerge reasonably unscathed. <p>

"You look the way I feel."

Her heart jumped to her throat and her body stiffened. Suddenly, she placed the voice.

> Amy... Groaning with relief, Willow banged her head lightly against the locker door,
 "Tell me about it. Today has been SUCH hell...."

"You still haven't told them."

"No, how did you know?"

"I just walked past Buffy and Xander talking. They're worried about you. They think

> you're avoiding them for some reason..and..well...they're right." <p>

Willow turned to regard the young witch and was surprised at the dark glasses covering

> her eyes, "Amy, are you okay?" <p>

Amy grinned wryly and leaned against the lockers as well, "Yeah. My eyes are a bit

> sensitive to light now for some reason. I'm feeling alot stronger than I expected I would,
 so it's not too bad. Besides, I think the glasses make me look mysterious." She wiggled

> her eyebrows comically and they both erupted into giggles. <p>

Willow sobered up almost immediately, "Amy, how am I going to tell them? They're

> going to kill me. I-I can't even imagine what Giles will say...especially since I've kept it from
 him for so long..." The two girls started walking along the bright halls towards the front exit.

"Well, Buffy will be happy, right?"

"I'm...not so sure. She and Ms. Calendar were never that close, but the last time they

> were together, they were in a pretty bad fight. Buffy felt so guilty when she found out that
 Ms. Calendar'd been killed. She's also very loyal to Giles. I really don't know how she'll > react." <p>

"Well, Willow, what's done is done. I think you'll just have to trust them with the truth."

"Trust who with what truth?"

Both girls jumped and spun around.

"Oh...Xander," Willow smiled weakly.

"Hey Wills," he smiled brightly and then saw her companion, "Oh..hi Amy." He > immediately dropped his gaze. <p>

For once, Amy was glad that she was wearing her glasses as she rolled her eyes. Xander > had been acting weird around her ever since the whole magic spell incident. That kid is
 so obnoxious, I can't believe he *still* thinks I want him... "Well, this is my cue to > leave," flashing a brilliant smile, she started walking in the opposite direction until she
 felt Willow's hand create a vice grip on her forearm, forcing her to stumble back into > place. <p>

"Umm..N-no...Amy, don't leave so fast..don't forget that we have to....STUDY at my > house for that...project we were assigned," Willow stammered I am SO bad at
 lying!! . She gritted her teeth and waited a beat hoping that the other girl would pick up on the > story. <p>

"Willow, it's Friday," Xander protested, "studying is, like, illegal."

Amy paused and turned her attention back to a very suspicious looking Xander.

"Well, it's a pretty big project," she countered.

"What class?" he challenged.

"History," Willow blurted before Amy could stop her.

"Wills, I'm in your history class. We didn't have any project assign-,"

"Well, if you MUST know, Xander," Amy broke in rudely, "It's a special project that I > have to complete because..I...," she lowered her voice for effect, "I haven't been doing
 that well in history..."

This explanation seemed to go much better with the dark-haired boy, "Ooohh. Like, as an > extra-credit kind of thing?" <p>

Amy had to stifle a giggle. He actually looked sympathetic.

"Yes," Willow rejoined, "And I've volunteered to help her to boost my own grade..
> G-gotta keep up that GPA, colleges are really competitive these days..." <p>

"Oh, well, Buffy and I were going to the Bronze an-,"

"Nope, can't make it," Willow shrugged helplessly and started to walk away, dragging
> Amy with her. <p>

"Oh, well then I'll call you!" he shouted after her as the two girls beat their hasty retreat.

"We'll be really busy!" Willow yelled in response as they tumbled backwards out the
> door and into the sunshine. <p>

Pausing for a moment to look at each other, they both burst out laughing and started
> running down the steps and across the lawn. <p>

"Good cover!" Willow gasped.

"You went along with it very nicely," Amy grinned.

"Yeah, well I saw that episode of Dawson's Creek, too."

Part 4

Willow paced nervously in front of her mirror. It was just past sundown and she needed
> to check up on Angel. He hadn't called or emailed for the past three days
 as she'd asked him to and she couldn't help but feel worried. They'd met frequently these past few weeks. The meetings were often short and Willow initiated pretty much all of them but it was a strange comfort to her to see him and to know that he was all right. Even though they usually said very little during their meetings, Willow hoped that he was becoming more comfortable
> around her. It was nice to have him back. <p>

Regardless, she also knew that she'd have to deal with the rest of her friends sooner or later and she had absolutely no idea how she'd break the news to them. Deep in her heart, she knew that Amy was right. Willow couldn't hide behind her forever...fortunately, that wouldn't stop her from trying....

"Okay. I'm going. For real this time," she muttered softly as she stopped to stare at
> herself in the mirror. With shaking hands she rearranged her hair. What the heck am I
 doing? A hair check? For Angel? What am I, nuts? Like he's going to care what I look
> like...especially now... Vanity got the best of her, though, and she turned a few more
 times while straightening out her skirt before heading to the bed to grab her backpack so
> she could leave. <p>

She heard a faint rustling noise from outside.

Dropping her backpack onto her bed again, she carefully picked up the stake on her

> dresser. She tiptoed towards the large French doors which led to the small balcony outside
 her window. Cool it Willow, you're safe as long as you stay inside the house... hah.

> famous last words... <p>

Gritting her, teeth, she double-checked to make sure that the doors were firmly locked

> before gingerly pulling back the curtain. There he was. A dark shadowy figure putting
 something down and turning to climb out again.

She rapidly unlocked the doors and threw them open, "Angel?"

He looked up at her with one leg already swung half over the railing, "Willow! Hi...I

> didn't think you were home..." <p>

"How..how are you? Why didn't you call me like I'd asked?"

"Oh. Well, I was kind of busy thinking...about things. It must've slipped my mind."

Unable to stop herself from feeling a mild pang of pain and an odd sense of jealousy over

> that I'll bet he wouldn't have forgotten if I'd been Buffy. , Willow swiftly decided to
 drop the issue. How can I be so petty?

He's one of my best friends. He needs me to be

> there, after all he's been through, of course he's liable to forget to 'check in', I mean,
 geez, I'm not his mother...

Angel looked on with a feeling of mild anticipation as Willow seemed to be considering

> something. The truth was, it *hadn't* slipped his mind. He'd remembered to call. In fact, he'd sat by his phone almost every day, picking it up, getting halfway through the number and then dropping it again before getting up to pace around his apartment some more. He wasn't really sure if she'd meant it when she'd
 asked him to call. There was so much he wanted to know from her. So many questions

> that needed to be asked. She was like his only lifeline to his previous existence, but he
 was too afraid to cling to her for fear that she'd end up hating him as well.

"Oh, well, that's okay," she smiled at him, a faint note of sadness in her voice, "I

> understand...you were...busy." <p>

I've hurt her feelings... He sighed softly, "So, where were you going?"

"Going?" she seemed a bit surprised.

"Well, you're kind of dressed up, aren't you?" as soon as the words left his mouth, Angel

> would have given almost anything to take them back. <p>

Willow's face couldn't have gotten any redder.

"Oh..well..I....," she tried desperately to stop blushing while knowing very well that the
> effort was futile This is so humiliating, now what am I supposed to say? Why yes, Angel,
 I just spent the past half an hour getting ready to see you...

I can't believe it. I did it again... This had to be the single worst conversation he'd ever had with anyone in his life. It even rivaled the one he'd had where he'd denigrated Buffy's 'performance' the night after he'd changed. He couldn't seem to say anything right.

"I meant to say that you look really nice, I mean, not that you normally *don't* look nice,
> but you just look extra-nice tonight, for some reason," he rushed on trying to cover for his
 mistake but not realizing that he was only making things worse, "So I was just wondering
> if you were going somewhere or something, not that you have to be going somewhere to
 look nice b-,"

"Angel, I was coming over to check up on you," she finally blurted out in order to end
> both her misery as well as his. <p>

There was a beat as the vampire processed the information, "Oh."

"Yes." Boy, where was a good change of subject when you needed one?

Does that mean she dressed up because of me? Unable to help it, Angel felt strangely
> happy with that knowledge. The automatic wash of self-loathing which followed after it,
 however, helped to destroy that emotion. I don't deserve to be happy. Least of all now.
> Â Of course she didn't dress up because of me. She was probably going to the Bronze or something straight afterwards. <p>

"So, what were you leaving here? I thought I saw you put something down.. " Her green
> eyes traveled past him and carefully around the edges of the balcony, looking for the
 object he'd left for her.

"Oh, yes, that," Beyond relieved to be talking about something else, Angel stooped down,
> picked up a large plastic bag and handed it to her. <p>

Tropical Fish.

"Oh wow..Angel..."

"I bought them a little while ago. I umm...I had to break into the store, but I left an adequate amount of money for the owner to cover the window I had to shatter to get in." Why am I babbling? My God, I think I'm babbling....

"Angel..." she was utterly speechless.

"I tried to find another store which was open later at night so that I wouldn't have
> to break in and all but there weren't any around here and I really wanted to get you these
 as soon as possible to replace the...others." He wasn't sure why, but something deep
> inside him wanted her to trust him and not to be threatened by him. He wanted her to feel
 at ease. And it was causing him to act like an eight year old.

"Angel, you really didn't have to do this."

"Willow, I took your fish out of their tank, gutted them and strung them along a piece of
> wire. Yes, I do think that means I owe you another set." <p>

"Well, I appreciate it," She nodded slowly and held the bag up to her face, "I really do."

"Have you...spoken to Buffy or Giles recently?"

"No, not yet."

"When do you plan on telling them?"

"Don't you mean when do "we" plan on telling them?"

"I don't think it's that good an idea to have me there when you break the news to the-,"

"What are you talking about? You *have* to be there. It'll give them all an opportunity to
> see that it's really you and that you're back to the way you were before." <p>

"Too chicken to do it on your own, huh?"

"Absolutely."

Despite their situation he started laughing. She always had this uncanny ability to make
> him feel better. "Okay, Willow, I'll come with you. How does Sunday night sound?" <p>

It would mean that she'd have to somehow avoid everyone for two more days, but she'd
> live...at least until Buffy found out. "Sunday night sounds great." <p>

Angel nodded. It'd give him a little more time to get his own life back into order and he knew that the teenagers also had a two week vacation coming up. It'd give everyone an adjustment period before school started again.

"Alright, I'll see you then," he turned and started to climb down again.

She almost dropped the bag of fish she was holding, "Wait Angel, what are you doing

> tomorrow night?" <p>

He paused, "Tomorrow night? I hadn't really thought about it."

"Would you like to do something?"

"With you?"

"Well, yes."

"Like..?"

"I dunno, hang out at your apartment and talk or something?"

"Well...", he considered turning her down, but the sweet and hopeful look on her face

> made him think better of it, "that sounds nice. Sure, why not?"
Almost like a lost
 puppy.

Her smile could've lit up all of Sunnydale, "Terrific. I'll come over tomorrow night then."

He nodded silently and dropped out of site.

By the time she got to the edge of the balcony, he was gone.

Still smiling, Willow turned with her new bag of fish and walked into her room, locking

> the doors behind her. <p>

It wasn't until then that an odd thought occurred to her

Ohmigosh, did I just ask him out?

Part 5

She awoke with a start.

Vaguely, in the back of her mind, she thought she heard the phone ringing.

Geez, what time is it? Bleary eyed, she reached over and turned her alarm clock

> around. <p>

9:30 am.

Who the heck would be calling this early on a Saturday?

She buried her face in her pillow and sighed before blindly reaching up and grasping the

> phone. <p>

"Hello?" she muttered groggily into the receiver, her voice still slightly muffled by the

> pillow. <p>

"Amy? Did I wake you?"

"No."

"Oh good, Amy you'll never believe what happened..."

"I'll bet I won't..."

"Guess who came over last night?"

"Willow? Is that you?"

"Angel!"

"Do you still want me to guess?"

"Are you paying attention?"

"Yes. Of course I am. Why did he come over?" she yawned sleepily and flipped over
> onto her back. <p>

"To give me some tropical fish."

"Oh, okay, that makes absolutely no sense."

"It's a long story, listen Amy, what're you doing today?"

Presumably, sleeping. "Nothing much as of now."

"Would you be interested in coming over?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Well, it's no big deal but I have some really cool stuff that I wanted to show you that I
> found from the internet about techno-paganism." <p>

"Mmmhmmmm," she murmured, sitting up.

"And I also wanted to ask your advice about a few things."

"My advice?"

"Fashion-wise and...other-wise."

"Oh...ok," she agreed, furrowing her brows slightly, "Wait..Willow, who did you
> say came to visit you last night?" <p>

"Nevermind, I'll talk to you about it later."

"But Will-,"

"Bye Amy, see you in about an hour."

"No, Willow, wa-," the abrupt sound of the dial-tone filled her ear, cutting off her final

> remark. <p>

"Weirdness..."

Shrugging slightly, she hung up the phone and rolled out of bed to get ready.

"Yes, but I'm worried about her."

"Buffy, she gets like this sometimes. Especially around certain times of the month..."

"Xander, I can't believe you just said that."

"What? It's true!"

"Look, I just think that one of us should go check up on her. I emailed her twice last night
> and again this morning. I just tried to call and her phone line was busy." <p>

"Maybe she's online.."

"I tried her cell."

"Well, maybe she turned off her cell and took her phone off the hook to prevent her crazy friends from calling
> obscenely early on weekends..." he rolled over onto his side and propped his head up on
 one hand, "Seriously though, Buffy, this is ridiculous. Willow's fine. I know her, she wouldn't do anything stupid. Not without telling us at least. She's terrible at lying too, you know that. If she was trying to sneak around behind our backs and do anything, we'd know in a second."

"Not if she avoided us while she was doing it, Xander."

He paused.

"Look, why don't one of us go over to her house?"

"I don't think she'll be there, she's working on some History extra-credit project with Amy."

"Well then, call Amy."

"Are you kidding me? I can't do that!"

"Xander, you need to get over this. Amy doesn't want you. It was the spell. It was
> seriously powerful. Believe me, I know." <p>

"It's not just that. She just gives me the heebie jeebies for some reason."

"She's been hanging around with Willow a lot lately."

"Yeah, I've noticed that too. What's up with that?"

"Well, *we* certainly haven't been hanging around her that much."

"What do you mean?"

"Xander, between Giles and I trying to save the world and you and Cordelia trying to rid
> the universe of hormones, when was the last time we all just hung out?" <p>

He actually had to think hard about that one, "Gosh, maybe a month or so ago."

"Catching a twinkie break in the hall between classes doesn't count."

"Oh. Okay, longer then."

"Exactly, so she's obviously lonely."

"You're right, I never thought about that before.."

"Why am I not surprised?" Buffy muttered under her breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Look, Xander, I think you're right. Willow's just probably feeling down right
> now, that's all." <p>

"No, you know Buffy, I think there might actually be something else wrong with her
> maybe we sh-," <p>

"The only thing wrong with her is that she's been consummately ditched by all of her
> closest friends. The best way to fix this is to try to include her more and to schedule some
 stuff to do all together this vacation."

'That's a good idea, Buffy, but I still think that we sh-,"

"Great, glad that you agree. Well, I gotta run, see you tonight!"

"No Buffy, wa-,"

He moaned softly at the sound of the dial tone and hung up the phone.

Well, he wasn't getting any more sleep, that much was certain.

Poor Willow. I never even saw it before. I am SUCH an ass. She must be so
> miserable. <p>

"I am SO excited," she squealed, waving her hands in front of her flushed face as ran
> back upstairs, "But WHY am I so excited?" <p>

This had been a question which had been troubling her ever since she'd changed Angelus
> back to Angel. It was utterly ridiculous and every time she thought about it, she knew
 how ridiculous it sounded but she also knew it was the truth. She was actually looking
> forward to having Angel all to herself for these last few days. She was, in fact, dreading
 the moment when she'd have to admit to her friends that he had changed back.
> Dreading it for more than just the fact that everyone would be mad at her for lying. It was
 more a question of having to give him up and share him with the rest of the world. Her mind
> told her that it was unspeakably selfish and that she should feel incredibly guilty, but her
 indefinable excitement and happiness over seeing him that night indicated otherwise.

"It's just that I'm...I'm happy to have someone to talk to," she decided aloud.

Yes, that was it. It was the simple companionship which was causing that wistful ache in
> her chest whenever she thought of him. It was the wonderment of being able to feel
 comfortable around someone again which made her so talkative around him and so free.
> It was the joy of having an acquaintance, a confidant, a *friend* in her life again which
 caused her head to spin and her heart to beat twice as fast whenever he was around.
> She had every right to be selfish and to want to cling onto him like this, especially after
 having been so lonely for so long. It was only natural to want to preserve this.
> Yes, it was friendship, that's all. It wasn't something silly like love. Love was different.
 Love was sickness and pain and tears. Her experience with Xander had taught her that in
> a way she'd never forget. Besides, love didn't just take place in the span of two weeks. (The fact that she'd actually known him for almost 2 years was somewhat irrelevant. Especially because he'd been with Buffy then...) <p>

And so, having rationalized things to herself, Willow felt much better.

With a clear mind and a light heart she began to pick out her clothes for that night. She'd wait for Amy to arrive before she figured out what to do with her hair.

He lay flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Try as he might, he couldn't get her face
> out of his mind. <p>

He was in love with her. That much was certain. He'd always loved her, he realized that now. Even from the very _instant he saw her, he'd fallen hard for her. So alone. So pretty and vulnerable. She lived a lonely existence, always_ _out of place with very few friends. He remembered the look in her eyes when he'd first attacked her. So stricken and_ _lost. She had gotten over that though and

gradually she became more hurt than scared. So hurt and angry that she'd_ _taken matters into her own hands._

Unable to stand it anymore, Angel got off of the bed and strode around his apartment.

> Damn, I'm so restless. <p>

He couldn't help but smile when he thought about her. How did she manage to be so

> beautiful and strong and yet at the same time, soft and feminine? Yes, he loved her. He

> loved her alot. How could he admit it to her, though? How could he ever come to terms

> with it and say it aloud after everything which had happened?

He picked up a delicate vase at the other end of the room.

No, he couldn't risk it. She'd try to push him away because of what her friends would think. She'd never speak to him _again. As is, their relationship was edgy_ _and precarious. This would simply push it over the cliff and she'd get scared and run._

He swiftly smashed the vase against the wall. Hah. Much better. Feeling the tension

> ease slightly in his shoulders, he reached for yet another item, this time an antique clock,
 and flung it against the floor. The sound it made was almost pleasant.

No, he couldn't risk losing her forever. He loved her too much to put her life into

> jeopardy and such a revelation would do just that.

Quickly, he began running around the apartment, picking things up and throwing them

> wherever he fancied. Hey, it's my building, I can do whatever I want. <p>

He'd wait it out. All for her.

Gradually he began to lose steam.

He'd keep his emotions in check at all times because he never wanted to cause her pain.

> Never again.

Slowly, he sank to the floor.

He'd do anything for her, he knew that now.

Part 7

"Okay Willow, you have to calm down," Amy did her best to sound authoritative but

> ended up smiling anyway. For her, the past few years had been hard. Especially with her mom
 going postal and using her own body to try to kill people, but being quick to adjust to the

> abnormal, she'd gotten over it. She didn't have too many friends after the whole episode,
 though. She thought but she'd gotten over that aspect of her life as well, but soon found
> out that she hadn't. Hanging around with Willow was one of the nicest things to happen
 to her in a long time. It made her feel inexplicably warm inside and made her remember
> what it was like to have friends, a feeling she was far too removed from. <p>

"The red or the black?"

"It's orange and dark grey and I go with the orange."

"Orange it is. Short sleeves or no sleeves?"

"No sleeves."

"Are you sure?"

"Wait..where's the shirt that I brought? Try that one on."

"Oh yeah..but does it go with the orange skirt?"

"Well yes, I think it does. Wait a second..what shoes were you planning on wearing with
> that?" <p>

Willow held up her brown Mary Janes.

Amy shook her head, "Uh uh. Those are a no go."

"Well, I really don't have anything else that would look remotely ni-,"

In midsentence, Amy snapped her fingers and a pair of black clogs suddenly appeared.

Willow blinked, "Wow, those are nice!"

"And they'll go perfectly with your skirt."

"You've really got to show me how to do that sometime."

Amy grinned wryly, "You know, I can."

"Wait...seriously?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"But, don't you have to have witch's blood or something?"

Amy looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, it helps, but it isn't the be all and end all of witchcraft. I can teach you some
> simple things which might be helpful in certain situations." <p>

"Like?"

"Like how to levitate small objects or how to transport things. Shoes for instance."

"You're not kidding...ohmigosh, Amy that's so cool!!"

"Hey, I'd be thrilled to teach you. Think about the amount of fun we could have in Ms.

> Allan's physics class!" <p>

Willow burst out laughing.

"I've been making the chalk float every once in awhile just to see her face turn that

> incredible shade of red." <p>

"I'd have to say that it's more of a purple."

Soon, both girls were in hysterics.

"Okay, Wills, you'd better be careful, you don't want to smudge your makeup. *And* we

> still have to do your hair to get you ready for this date." <p>

"Wait, what?" She stopped wiping the tears out of her eyes, "A date?"

"Hmm?" Amy mumbled looking under the bed, "Yes. What did you do with the other

> sheer stocking I gave you?" <p>

"Amy, just a sec..this isn't a date."

The blond popped her head back up almost instantly, "What?"

"Angel and I are just hanging out."

The witch studied her friend for a few moments, trying to gauge just how serious she was

> about that last comment before responding, "Willow, look around you. Look at this room.
 Do you always get this dressed up just to hang out?"

There it was again. The "dressing up" comment. Willow took a guilty glance around her

> room and sure enough, clothing was strewn everywhere. There was tons of makeup,
 mostly Amy's, on the dresser and several pairs of nylons mixed with shoes littering the

> floor. She hadn't even done this much damage to her room the first time her parents let her
 and Xander go to the Bronze alone in ninth grade. Amy was right. She *was* dressing up.

> This could be a problem. <p>

"Oh dear."

"What?"

"Well, I-I just don't want to look weird or act weird around him. Why am I doing this

> Amy?" <p>

"Uhh...because you like him?" she chose to hazard the obvious guess.

"No, no I don't," the red-haired hacker shook her head vehemently, "I can't."

As much as it shocked her, Amy knew that Willow was serious. She honestly didn't

> believe that she harbored any feelings for Angel. She's worried about betraying
 Buffy. Until now, it hadn't quite struck Amy exactly how bad Willow's situation was.

> She had undertaken this task largely on her own. She'd risked her life to complete it. She
 was forced to hide her success from the few friends she did have because it might

> alienate them even further and now, to make matters even worse, she had inadvertently
 fallen in love with the subject of all of this madness. Without even consciously knowing

> it. <p>

Amy swallowed. Hard. This wasn't going to be an easy situation to maneuver.

"I need to change...b-but I don't have any time. Oh no, Amy, what am I going to do?" Willow

> was near tears. <p>

"Okay, calm down," the blond whispered soothingly, "It's all going to be alright. We'll

> figure something out." Hmm... I need to make her look nice but still not too dressy. <p>

While Willow was searching for some kleenex, Amy closed her eyes and pictured the

> outfit. There. Perfect. She opened her eyes and waved her hands swiftly. In a
 glittering instant, Willow's clothing had changed and her hair and makeup were switched

> as well to match. <p>

"Amy, have you seen the tissue bo-," the hacker happened to glance at her reflection in

> that second and gasped, "Ohmigosh, it's perfect!" <p>

"Dark corderoys with a white top with some funky suspenders. Cool, but not too weird,"

> the witch smiled, standing behind her, 'I think it works.' <p>

Willow spun around a few times, admiring the two simple braids her hair had been pulled

> back into and the understated makeup which complimented the outfit perfectly. Just a
 touch of blush, a little eyeliner and some pale lipgloss. Cute, but casual. Special but not

> too obvious. It was perfect. <p>

"And now, Cinderella, I say you are ready to go "hang out" with Prince Charming," she

> leaned over and gave the red-head a hug, "Have fun, call me later." <p>

"I will, and I can't thank you enough for all this," she returned the hug, "Shall I see you
> to the door milady?" <p>

"Nope, it shan't be necessary," Amy replied in a snooty British accent. With a wave and
> a mischievous grin, she crossed her arms over her chest and blinked in an obvious 'I
 dream of Jeanie' parody before disappearing.

"I have *got* to learn how to do that," Willow muttered under her breath as she went
> about searching for her keys, her wallet and the last few things she'd need. <p>

Having collected everything, she hurriedly grasped her small backpack and headed
> downstairs. She only had about half an hour to get to Angel's apartment alone before the
 journey would be too dangerous. She'd made it as far as the front door when she heard
> the bell ring. Nearly jumping out of her skin, she stood on her tip toes, and peered
 through the peephole. What she saw almost caused her to scream on the spot.

Xander.

There he stood, oblivious as ever, occasionally leaning forward to look
> through the other end of the peephole while juggling a pint of cafe ole. Willow's favorite
 ice cream. What the heck is he doing here? Oh geez, Xander, just when I thought life
> couldn't get any more complicated... <p>

"Willow?" he called, breaking her out of her thoughts, "Wills, it's Xander, open up. I
> brought you and Amy some ice cream." <p>

Well, that did it. She was just going to stand there with the door locked and wait
> him out. Eventually, he'd be forced to leave once it became obvious that no one was
 home.

"Willow?" he called again.

The red-head bit her lip in frustration.

Suddenly, much to her absolute horror, she heard the sound of keys.

Oh God. Xander has a spare key to the front door. I totally forgot about that. Her eyes
> narrowed slightly He's only supposed to use those keys in the case of an emergency. I
 mean, what the heck? He's been out there barely 3 seconds and he wants to come
> barging in? How does he know I'm not here and half naked getting out of the shower or
 something? How rude..

The key began turning in the lock and Willow realized that she didn't have any time to
> spare being angry at him. First, she needed a plan for escape. <p>

Barely managing to get out of the way in time, she leaped up the stairs just as the door
> swung open. <p>

"Willow...?"

The hacker stood in her room desperately looking around. Should I hide? Pretend like I
> was asleep or something? Oh no..I'm supposed to be with Amy. I can't be asleep. <p>

"Willow? Hey Wills, you up there?"

Hearing the voice at the bottom of the stairs sent Willow into a fit of panic. Quickly, she slammed her door shut. Uh oh...baaaad move. Almost instantly, she heard his sneakers pounding up the stairs at an ever-quickenning pace.

With no other options left, Willow did the one thing she could do.

She leapt out the window.

2. Part 2

Around 20 minutes later, the doorbell rang at Angel's apartment.

A solitary figure lying on a pile of black silken sheets groaned. Maybe they'll just go away...

The bell was followed by insistent knocking.

Maybe not.

Snarling in irritation, Angel shoved himself up and rolled out of bed to answer the door, If these are *more* of Spike's goonies, there is going to be some SERIOUS
> bloodletting in-, He whipped the door open, already in attack stance when he came face to face with a very startled young girl. <p>

"Willow?" he gasped in surprise.

"Angel?" she backed away fearfully.

Suddenly he realized he must have his game face on. The guilt was enormous as he
> quickly shifted back to his human features. <p>

He felt the anger and power ebb right out of him at the sight of the pretty teenager
> cowering at the other side of the hall, "Yes..yes, Willow, it's Angel. I'm sorry about that."<p>

She let out a sigh of relief.

His shoulders slumped slightly and his gaze glued itself to the floor.

They stood like that for a few more seconds before Willow finally cleared her throat,
> "Well Angel? Aren't you going to invite me in?" she asked firmly.
<p>

His eyes shot back up to her face almost instantly in order to gauge her emotions.

She'd been expecting that reaction and gave him a huge, warm smile.
"I came by to give you something and to see how you're doing."

"Oh. Well, yes, of course, come in." Needless to say he was quite a bit surprised that she still wanted to be alone behind closed doors with him. He honestly hadn't expected her to come visit him or to keep checking up on him either.

"You look surprised, didn't you remember that we were supposed to hang out tonight?" she demanded once he'd closed the door.

Oh. I completely forgot about that. "It..ahh..it slipped my mind."

She nodded briskly and began to survey the apartment. The same apartment he'd spent all day trashing.

Forgot about that too.

She turned her steely gaze back to him and he flinched slightly Here it comes..violent tendencies and all are out in the open. Here's the part where she leaves.

"Angel, I'm worried about you," she murmured softly, crossing the room.

There, she had done it again. She'd managed to catch him completely off guard and
> shock him. <p>

Her demeanor seemed to swing almost as quickly as his. From all at once reprimanding and scrutinizing to tender and loving.

"I'm fine, Willow, really," he shifted uncomfortably. It wasn't just that it
> felt strange to know she cared, but it also felt good. And feeling good wasn't
 something that Angel was willing to allow himself any time soon.

"Don't you..umm..have parents? That is to say..aren't they going to be worried about
> you? You really shouldn't be here," he hastily stepped away from her. She smelled too nice. <p>

"My parents are out of town. Perpetually. And I *should* be here. I'm checking up on a friend."

"Willow..," he began in exasperation, "what...happened to your

hair..?" His voice trailed off as he suddenly took in her torn corderoys and stained shirt as well.

She blushed furiously, "I um....I had an accident." She turned away from him and started wandering around the apartment, "Angel, do you have a mirror around here?"

"Were you attacked?" he felt the energy pulse back into him as he growled in anger.

She went into the bathroom and he followed her.

"WERE YOU?" he demanded again.

She swiftly shook her head to the negative before exiting the bathroom. "Don't you have a mirror anywhere in this place?"

"Then...??" He followed her as she stalked into his bedroom.

After a brief glance around, she walked back into the living room. "Angel, how on earth do you get by without a mirror?"

"Willow, I don't HAVE A REFLECTION!!" he gripped her shoulders firmly, "What happened to you?"

"I went out a window. Must you pry?????" she yelled back in exasperation.

His eyes rounded, "Someone threw you out a window?"

"NO, I *jumped* out a window," she explained patiently.

"Oh...what?"

"I-it's a long story," she waved him off immediately, "We can get into it later."

He shook his head in wonder as she shrugged him off and headed for her backpack.

> Maybe she's on some sort of drug or something.... <p>

"Angel, have you eaten?"

"No."

"Good, I brought you something to eat."

Right before his eyes she reached into her bag and yanked out two pouches of blood.

"Willow, where did you get those?" Even he could hear the edge of hunger in his voice as he eyed the pouches and he hated himself all the more for it.

"I volunteer at the blood bank. Don't worry about it." She picked up one of them and
> threw it to him, "Drink up." <p>

He looked at the bag and then at her, "Willow, this is human blood. I don't drink human blood anymore." He firmly tossed the pouch onto the chair at the other end of the room.

"Angel, you're weak and you haven't eaten, just make an exception this once until you can go out hunting on your own again."

"Absolutely not."

She gazed at him silently before surrendering to his will. He was obviously not going to back down on this one.

"Fine then. Hey, want to watch some TV?"

"What?" he was thrown by her sudden change of tactics, "Willow, I really appreciate
> what you're trying to d-," <p>

"Oh wow, Angel. You don't even have a TV in here? What do you do all night?"

"Willow, I think you should go hom-,"

"No. I can't go home, Angel. Not now. Not until I spend some time with you."

"Willo-,"

"Will you sit down? Your pacing is making me nervous."

Almost automatically, he sat down at her request before wondering why.

She was more determined than ever to make this visit seem completely normal. Just two friends, hanging out together on a Friday night. Two totally normal pals, chatting it up with a little bit of take-out from the local blood bank. Hmmm...

"Well, you don't have any mirrors or TVs in here...or a computer. So what would you
> like to do? Do you have any board games?" <p>

He simply stared at her.

"Guess not....hey, I have an idea, let's have a conversation," she smiled brightly while sitting on the edge of the couch, "You go first."

She looks like a pixie or an elf with her hair like that. Thats when he realized she'd been speaking to him...something about a conversation.... Bad idea, "Willow, you know me, I'm not much of a conversationalist."

"Well, neither am I."

That's true. "Okay, what do you want to talk about?" He couldn't understand why he kept giving in to her. She was definitely a major switch from Buffy. She was much more honest and straightforward. He could tell that she was willing to put

> herself on the line for her friends both physically and emotionally. Which was exactly what she was doing for him. <p>

This was going to take some serious adjustment.

"Anything you'd like, Angel. Life, hobbies, favorite TV shows...if you had a TV which

> you don't so we can scratch that one...unless of course you used to watch TV at some point and had a favorite show from back then and we could talk about that. You know what show I really like that's pretty old? I Love Lucy. It's SO hysterical. I mean, the whole 'red-head' factor has nothing to do with it. That's why Xander thinks I like it. He doesn't think it's funny at all. He's really into the Three Stooges, though, which I absolutely don't understand because I've watched it with him and I don't even crack a smile while he's on the ground laughing so hard I think I'll have to administer CPR. In fact, it's funnier to watch him than to watch the show. There's a definite difference between "girl humor" and "guy humor", I think. Hey did you watch any cartoons when you were little? Oh, well, I guess not cause there weren't TVs when you were little, but I used to love cartoons. I'd wake up at 6am and run downstairs to watch them. They had some of the coolest cartoons back then, none of the 'mutant' stuff they have now. Have you noticed how EVERYTHING is mutant now? There's even some show with mutant bunnies, now that's just twisted. When I was little, I liked the Smurfs, before they time-traveled of course, and Kidd Video, and Poochie, and My Little Pony, and The Wuzzles, and She-Ra, which granted was sorta sexist in hindsight, but at the time I wanted to BE her, an-," <p>

"Okay, Willow, you know what? I *do* want to talk about something," Angel chose to interrupt her now knowing that if he didn't, she'd be liable to carry on this one
> conversation with herself all night. <p>

Willow smiled internally Note to self. Babbling incessantly makes Angel talk.

> Outside, she was all innocence, "Yes?" <p>

"It's...well..." he stood and started pacing again, "It's hard for me to say."

"Oh, give it a try, it can't be that bad."

"Oh, but it is, trust me it is," he rolled his eyes, "....it's just that," he suddenly sat down right next to her and lowered his voice, "There's this face I just can't get out of my head."

"A-a face?"

"Willow, as a..a...a friend," he seemed to have trouble saying the word and believing it at the same time, "can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Angel!" unable to help herself, she leaned forward slightly and her heartbeat

> picked up just a bit. <p>

"It's pretty important, and I can give you time to think about it, but I really need an

> answer." <p>

She nodded.

"I feel so stupid asking, and I know this isn't the right thing to do, but I can't help
> myself." <p>

She nodded sympathetically.

" I mean, I've turned it over in my head a hundred times, and every time I do it, I can't seem to get away from my feelings..."

She nodded again, her heart jumping to her throat.

"But I trust you Willow, I really do. I think I've always trusted you without even knowing it," he took her hands in his, "And..I don't want you to hate me for asking you this, especially because I'd promised myself that I wouldn't when this whole thing started, but now I know that I can't let it go any longer."

"Angel, just ask!" she finally exploded.

"Do you think I have a chance?"

"A-a chance?"

He looked incredibly guilty but forced his gaze to her own, "At a...at a relationship..."

Willow just about fainted, "A relationship?"

"With Buffy."

"With.....Buffy..oh," she looked down immediately and tried to blink away the
> unexpected tears which flowed into her eyes. Must be dust in her contact lenses again. <p>

"Willow? Please don't be mad at me. I know it's unfair to put you on the spot bu-,"

She looked back up at him, "No. No Angel, it's fine."

Was it his imagination or did her eyes look a bit brighter than they did before?

"I understand your position completely, and I don't hate you at all," she continued,
> forcing herself to smile at him kindly, "I could never hate you, you're one of my closest friends," she dropped her gaze again and studied the crinkles in the tan leather sofa, "I can ask Buffy, if you'd like. I think your chances are good though," she raised her eyes back to his, "Very good. With a little bit of prodding, I'm sure she'll come around..." What am I saying? Am I agreeing to help him to win back Buffy? Ohmigosh I am.. <p>

"Y-you mean, you'll help me to get her back?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes...I will."

"Thank you Willow," he whispered softly. In a rare show of emotion, he leaned over and hugged her.

Falling limply into the embrace, she felt the tears well in her eyes. Wow, it sure
> is dusty in here.... <p>

Part 9

"So she wasn't there?"

"Well, *someone* was there. I heard the door slam upstairs."

"Any sign of who it might've been?"

"No, by the time I got up there, the room was empty. The window was open, though."

"Xander, it could've just been the wind that slammed the door shut. I think you're
> overreacting." <p>

"I don't. Her room was a disaster area. There were clothes and shoes and makeup all over the place."

"Makeup?"

"Yeah. It's not at all like her."

"Well, if there was makeup and stuff..maybe we *should* go take a look."

"My point exactly, what if she's possessed or something?"

"I think that both of you are overreacting," Giles broke in, looking up from one of his
> books, "She'll be fine, I saw her running across campus with Amy today. She looked a lot happier than I've seen her in a long time. And I can't believe that you simply violated her privacy by barging into her house like that, Xander." <p>

The boy had enough decency to look mildly embarrassed, "Well, I was worried about her. She isn't returning my phone calls and Buffy's been emailing her for the past few days and she hasn't been responding. We barely get to see her anymore. That and the fact that she's hanging out with Amy way too much."

"Well, why don't you just call Amy and see what's going on?"

"Don't go there, G-man."

"Oh, please Xander, don't tell me that you're still scared of her after that whole magic spell incident."

"No, I'm not 'scared', I'm just-,"

"Petrified out of your mind," Cordelia finished. She was sick of

watching them discuss

> this. It was Saturday night, they should be out having fun. "I hate to admit it, but I think that I'm going with Giles on this one. Willow's fine. In fact, she's probably at the Bronze right now, dancing the night away. Let's go check," she grabbed Xander's arm and started hauling him out of the library. <p>

"I think that's a wonderful idea. Buffy, you ought to go with them. Everyone has been on edge lately and a break would do us all some good."

Unable to believe her ears, the slayer simply stared at him, "You're kidding, right? No patrols?"

Giles removed his glasses and cleaned them thoughtfully, "No, no patrols for tonight. I think that one night off should be alright, especially since everyone has been so stressed. Vampiric activity has been down recently, and it should be fine as long as you three stay together at all times."

"Great, music to my ears. You heard the man, let's go," With that, Cordelia forcibly
> yanked both Xander and Buffy towards the library door, "Later's Giles!" <p>

"Goodnight, I'll see you all tomorrow morning at 10:30!"

Swallowing their collective groan, the three teens smiled and waved before dashing out the door, into the darkness.

> They were sitting so close that their knees were touching. <p>

She stared at him, her green eyes glittering in an almost predatory manner.

He returned her gaze evenly while making a few wild calculations in his head.

"Don't try to stall, fang-boy," she said in the most intimidating voice she could muster.

"I'm *not* stalling," he replied, trying to sound outraged while he stalled some more.

"Uh huh," she snickered, "Don't even *think* about lying to me. I'm a master at this. Now go."

Damn, she's got me. What am I gonna do.

"NOW," she urged.

"Fine, fine, seven," he replied in exasperation.

She paused a moment.

A HA! Gotcha!! he thought, doing a little victory dance in his head.

Suddenly, the predatory glitter returned to her eyes and his heart fell.

Uh oh....

She threw her head back and laughed heartily.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath.

"Angel?" she asked, grinning smugly and relishing every moment of it.

"Yes?" he responded, pouting slightly.

"Go Fish."

It had been a long past few weeks and as embarrassed as she would have been to admit it, Amy Madison had gone to bed on a Saturday night before 10:30. She hadn't been able to help it. She was downright exhausted. Between preventing homicidal vampires from killing her friends, early morning phone calls which forced her out of bed and using her powers to conjure up different outfits, she'd been pretty busy.

Hence, she'd fallen asleep almost the instant her head hit the pillow. And now she
> couldn't wait to wake up. <p>

The frequency of her visions has increased, and these were definately worse. They were still a bit foggy..not quite as vivid as the one she'd had the night Angelus was chasing Willow, but they were just as bad, especially since she didn't know what to
> make of them.

> It was the same over and over again. These long metal poles of some kind coming down, beating fiercely, next there was shouting, and finally lots of blood. The scene then shifted to a broken body, face obscured by shadows, lying out on cold cement. Finally, the sequence ended with a glimpse of a hill and a brilliant flash of sunlight. Again and again and again, the images and sounds paraded through her head. Always in the same order, always the same spacing, always the same length. She never got more information or insight than these few snippets. <p>

Finally clawing her way to consciousness on what must have been the fifth time through, she sat up in bed, her body covered by
> a cold sweat. <p>

She moaned softly and looked at her alarm clock.

10:47.

It was going to be a long night.

> Giles had his jacket on and was halfway to the door before he remembered his umbrella. <p>

Sighing softly, he returned to his office, but couldn't find it.

Finally, after an additional 10 minutes of searching, he located it under one of the large library tables. Xander and his fooling about....

Grumbling under his breath he tried to get it by reaching one arm under, but it was too far. Finally, he simply gave up and crawled under the table. Grabbing the umbrella, he started to back out, but paused when he saw a book underneath as well. "I am going to have to discuss proper library etiquette with all three of them," he muttered, reaching for it.

As he pulled it away, he was somewhat surprised to find tiny fragments of rope behind it. Now that's odd...we really need to clean more thoroughly. People could start asking questions.

After getting out from under the table, he picked up his umbrella and turned to throw the book into the "return" bin. He'd take care of it tomorrow morning. The cover of the book, however, gave him pause. "Scripts and Ancient Curses," he read aloud. Frowning slightly, he noticed that a few of the pages had been marked. Casually flipping through the chosen passages, his frown deepened, "Oh my."

His panic rapidly increasing, he dropped the book on the counter.

With shaking hands he picked up the phone...

Part 10

It was nearly 3am when a very bleary-eyed Willow finally returned home. "I am going *straight* to bed," she mumbled to herself after she'd locked the door and waved goodnight to Angel. The time they'd spent together had been marvelous. They'd really just hung out and talked for the first few hours but once he'd found a deck of cards in his closet, things had really started swinging. She'd beat him in three straight hands of Go Fish and five of Hearts. He was a bit put out at first and even went so far as to call her a card shark so she let him win the last two games of Hearts. It was bonding. Bonding was good. She felt bonded and now she was exhausted.

Passing through the living room, she noticed the answering machine blinking.

Wow, 7 messages, I sure am popular tonight.

The first three were from her parents. Alternately it went, Mom, Dad, Mom. She'd have to remember to call them. The next three were from Xander. She'd have to call him back too at some point. She stretched tiredly and flopped back onto the couch
> to listen to the last one: <p>

Beeeeepâ€|

After I hear this one, I'm going straight to bed.

"Willow? Th-this is Gilesâ€|"

The hacker grinned to herself, I can't believe Xander got Giles to call me tooâ€|

"I-I've discovered some ratherâ€|disturbing news and we're all at the library right now and..It would be a good idea if you came by as wellâ€|It's approximately 2:45am right now and I've sent Buffy over to get you. This is extremely important, Willow, and I look forward to hearing from you soon."

Click

This caused her to sit straight up. 2:45am? Well then, Buffy should be here rightâ€|

As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

â€|now
>

He walked casually down the street, hands in his pockets, humming softly under his breath. It had been a pretty interesting night. It seemed that the more he got to know her, the more he was surprised by the outwardly meek and quiet Willow
> Rosenberg. She was an unending series of contradictions. Physically fragile, she was mentally strong and quick. She was sweet and sincere but also knew when to be firm and hard-headed. Like that night he was going to kill himself. He frowned slightly. If
 she hadn't stopped himâ€|he shook his head. I owe a lot to her. I owe her my life two times over. Probably even more. She also had a very strange and unintentional way of making him laugh. He was growing to like her distinct sense of humor almost as quickly as he was growing to like her. Certainly, he'd gotten along with her before. He'd even come to her for help on occasion. But he'd never really gotten to *know* her. Not like he did now. Now, he was just beginning to see the spark and the life which lay just under the shy exterior. The "real" Willow Rosenberg.

Yes, this night had only strengthened his opinion of her. In fact, he couldn't remember a time when he'd been so at ease with another person. He couldn't help but grin at the memory of Willow trying to inconspicuously let him win at cards. She has a good heart. he suddenly realized. And above all, that was the one thing Angel respected about the red haired hacker. For someone who had lived on the Hellmouth for so long and had dealt with so many hardships at such a young age, it truly amazed him that she was able to remain as innocent and kind as she had.

Whistling, he started to turn a corner and that's when he felt it. An odd tingling sensation which was faint at first and then seized his entire being. Buffyâ€| He could sense her. She was coming towards him at a very quick speed. Swiftly stepping backwards into the shrubbery, Angel melted into the shadows in the way which only he could. He watched almost longingly as she ran past him. She was close enough to touch. His heart ached silently as he caught a faint whiff of her perfume. Vanilla.

Sighing softly, he watched her run in the direction he'd just come from. Next, she took a turn down Willow's street. Frowning, he waited. Within a few minutes, both Buffy and Willow emerged walking hurriedly. He caught pieces of their conversation as they flew past

him.

"So Giles hasn't said anything to you?"

"Nope, he wanted you to be there before he explained what this was all about. He seems pretty freaked out though. Do you have any ideas about what might be going on?"

"Ummâ€|no?"

By then, they'd moved so far that he couldn't hear anymore. Growling, he started to follow them. I wonder what's happening?

"Buffyâ€|Willow. Good," The librarian looked at both girls and nodded briskly.

Cordelia moaned softly, half asleep and sat up from her previous position of leaning against Xander, "Thank God for small favors. It took you people long enough. Do you know what lack of sleep does to a person? Dark circles right under the eyes. Very unattractive."

"Okay Giles, so what's up?" Buffy asked, pointedly ignoring Cordelia and taking a seat at the end of the table. Willow chose to stand, rather nervously, near the door.

"W-well, I was doing a bit of cleaning around here and I found some things which wereâ€|disturbing. Then I did some more cleaning and I found some more things..which were just as disturbing."

Willow felt her heart begin to sink as a very unsettled feeling invaded the pit of her stomach.

"It started with this book," he held up the offending object for the rest of the group to see.

Uh oh. Willow recognized it almost immediately and could feel the guilty flush start to creep up her neck. I thought I put that away.

"And then I found some odd scraps of rope and other books which had been mislaid," Giles continued, "As well as this." He held up a piece of crumpled paper.

I knew I should have shredded that. she kicked herself mentally.

"Okay Sherlock, so what's the deal?" Cordelia demanded, "What's on the paper?"

"If I'm not mistaken, this paper is a computer print-out of a restoration spell."

At the mention of the word "computer" all eyes turned to Willow. She fidgeted uncomfortably, fiddling with the bottom of her blouse.

"A restoration spell? As inâ€|to restore a person's soul?" Buffy

whispered softly.

"Willow," Giles asked, a serious look in his dark eyes, "Were you planning on using this?"

The library fell silent as everyone waited for an answer.

She shifted, "Wellâ€¦not exactlyâ€¦"

"Willow, do you now how dangerous this is? If you had found the spell, you should have come to me first. It's extremely powerful and you don't have the experience or the training to carry out something like this on your own. It's a good thing I caught this in time. We need to thoroughly explore our options. I'm not so sure that using the spell at this point is a good idea."

"Can I see it?" Buffy asked numbly as she took it from his hands.

"It could be outdated for all we know or it could even backfire."

Xander nodded vigorously, "Yup, spells can backfire. It really sucks when that happens. Besides, it's not right to change him back now. Not after he killed Ms. Calendar. I mean, how do we know that it won't happen again? How do we know he won't get happy and then go nuts and start killing people? The guy is dangerous, Willow."

"Well, the restoration is actually designed to *permanently* anchor the soul," she began.

"But we don't know if it would even work in the first place," Giles cut in, "You also have to realize that Angelus would most likely attack once he realized what was going on. If we ultimately failed, we'd have a very dangerous, antagonized vampire on our hands," he shook his head, "No, this is entirely out of the question."

"B-Butâ€¦"

"Willow, it was a good idea," Buffy looked up sadly from the piece of paper she was holding, "but I'm afraid Giles is right. I've given up on ever getting Angel back the way he was. I think this is for the best. If we tried to restore his soul, it would just
> complicate things more." <p>

"Y-you don't understand," the red-head stammered, tears starting to fill her eyes.

"Don't understand what?" Giles asked, slightly confused, "My God, Willowâ€¦you didn't actually attempt this already did you?" he stared at her in shock.

"No, it's not just that I attempted itâ€¦," she replied, her voice sounded pained and hoarse.

"She was successful," said a voice from the door.

Part 11

From the instant Angel stepped into the library, Willow's world started moving in slow motion.

First there was the collective gasp from her friends. Then there was the look of complete shock on their faces. Finally, the shouting began.

"Angel?" Buffy cried.

"Oh my God." Cordelia yelped, hiding behind Xander. He jumped up and started moving away from the table.

"How could you? Are you insane?" Willow started slightly when she realized that the question was directed at her.

"X-Xander, please!"

"NO, I can't believe you'd do this!! How could you do this to everyone, Willow?" The intense look of utter betrayal in his eyes was worse than anything she could have ever imagined.

Giles stared blankly at the whole scene before silently stalking off into his office.

"Xander, I didn-,"

"I can never trust you again," he hissed through clenched teeth, angrier than she'd ever seen him.

Unable to stand it, Willow looked past him, to where Angel had walked over to Buffy and was talking to her in a muted voice. The slayer looked to be near tears and was shaking her head slowly. He reached out to touch her arm and she flinched away
> from him. <p>

"How could you bring that bastard back in here?" Xander growled, drawing her attention back to him, "How dare you?? How dare you endanger ALL of us? How dare you disgrace Ms. Calendar's memory like this?"

"Xander!" she choked out, trying to get away from him.

He took hold of her arm harshly, "Willow, I don't even know who you are,"

"Xander! Stop!!" Cordelia insisted, grabbing him and trying to pull him away.

"Get the bloody hell out of my way," Giles bellowed, coming out of his office with a crossbow in hand.

That's when the real pandemonium broke loose.

Cordelia stopped struggling with Xander almost instantly and looked up in horror.

Angel paled slightly but didn't say anything as Giles roughly grabbed Buffy and shoved her away. He lifted the crossbow and aimed it directly at the vampire's heart.

"No!" Willow screamed, breaking away from Xander, and rushing to scramble over the table.

"Willow," Xander flew after her, grabbing her ankle just as she launched herself upwards.

"You killed her, you bastard, you killed the only woman I ever loved and you deserve to die for it," Giles snarled, a dull and icy look in his eyes as his fingers gripped the trigger.

Angel made no attempt to move.

Buffy sat a few feet away, stunned.

Cordelia quickly regained her senses and ran over to where Willow and Xander were still fighting.

"I'm sending you to hell."

With a vicious kick to the mouth, Willow forced Xander to drop her foot and launched him tumbling backwards into Cordy. Crawling on her hands and knees, she crossed the table and shot off the other side, falling face first. Her arms reached out and
> encircled Angel's waist, pulling them down together. <p>

As they spiraled downwards, Willow heard a faint wooshing noise just as the arrow flew past, nicking the side of her face. She
> landed heavily on his chest. <p>

Shaking, she sat up and lightly touched the cut the arrow's near miss had made, just under her eye.

"Willow, get out of the bloody way," Giles ground out, his voice barely recognizable to her ears.

She looked up to see him standing over them. Breathing hard and perspiring profusely, he was reloading the crossbow without taking his gaze off of the pair below. His eyes were vacant yet wild. He looked almost as if he'd lost his mind.

"No," she whispered defiantly.

He held up the crossbow, "I said get out of my way."

She stood up, suddenly getting very angry herself, "I said, NO goddammit."

The librarian faltered slightly.

"Put that thing down," she demanded, "Before you hurt someone."

"Willow, get out of the way. I'm not going to ask you again," he was almost pleading.

"If you want to kill him, you'll have to kill me first," she said

softly, deliberately walking directly up to the tip of the arrow, "Put the crossbow DOWN, Giles. You don't know what you're doing. Please."

There was a moment when she was sure her heart stopped beating. One brief moment when she thought he might actually shoot through her to get to the vampire below. Luckily, he didn't.

With a look of bitter sorrow and grief, Giles slowly lowered the weapon.

Willow let out the breath she hadn't even known she'd been holding. Over his shoulder, she saw Buffy starting to walk towards them. She looked on as a very shaken Cordelia helped up Xander who was nursing his injured jaw.

"Giles, I-I'm so sorry-," she moved towards him shakily, suddenly switching from an angry, stubborn fighter back to a frightened sixteen year old.

He shook his head and drew away from her, "Get out," he whispered.

"What?" she asked, not quite comprehending.

He turned his full attention to his young protégé, "Get..the..bloody hellâ€|OUT OF MY LIBRARY," he shouted at her, his face contorted in fury.

She gasped and paled slightly, her chin starting to tremble. Backing away, she felt the tears springing into her eyes again. She turned and bumped into Angel who had, at some point during the confrontation, gotten up to stand behind her. She pushed past him blindly and ran out the doors, top speed. Dead silence fell throughout the room and they could hear her sobbing loudly down the hall.

Wordlessly, Angel turned and ran after her.

3. Part 3

Part 12

She was a streak of red, sobbing hysterically, running down the empty streets of Sunnydale like a train out of control. She ran hard and fast, unseeing and uncaring. For all she knew she was the only person left in the world. Nothing mattered anymore.

It took him almost three blocks to catch up with her.

Once he got close enough to see her, he took to calling out her name, but to no avail. She either didn't hear him or chose not to respond. He picked up the pace, straining slightly but determined to catch her.

Finally, just as she turned down the corner of her own street, he managed to snag one of her suspenders and drag her to a halt. Barely stopping to even catch her breath, she jumped right into his arms like a lost kitten, wrapping her legs around his waist, her arms

around his neck and whimpering softly. Two weeks ago, this type of behavior would have made him uncomfortable. Heck, two hours ago it would have made him uncomfortable. Not now. No, now all had changed. He had grown used to this, used to her.

And so, he stood there, stroking her hair and offering silent support until she was finally able to speak. Briefly, he considered carrying her home, but before he could, she slowly lowered her legs and slid to the ground on her own accord, still leaning weakly against him.

"They hate me, all of them. Not that I blame them," she whispered dully.

"No, they don't hate you, Willow. They hate me. They're just surprised and confused right now, that's all. They'll get over it. No one could ever hate you."

"I've never seen Giles so mad," her voice sounded strained as she started walking towards her house. He followed closely behind, just in case.

"You saved my life. Again," he gently reminded her, "It was very brave of you."

"I kicked Xander in the head. Oh My GOD. I kicked my best friend in the head."

He soon grew to realize that she really wasn't paying attention to what he was saying.

> Knowing her extremely sensitive nature, the events of this night must have been an almost unbearable blow for her. Her friendships, though few, meant the world to her. And tonight, her world had shattered. <p>

They slowly walked up the steps to her house, "And Cordelia..I think I knocked Xander into her..I hope she didn't get hurt too. I saw her standing up, so I-I don't think she broke anything," her voice cracked slightly as she blindly unlocked the door, her eyes filling with tears again.

"Willow," he placed a firm hand on her shoulder, "They'll snap out of it. I promise you."

> Xander wasn't badly hurt and I saw Cordelia. She was a bit shaken up, but that was it. I can guarantee you that Giles feels guilty about everything already." <p>

She stepped into the house before turning to face him, "He kicked me out of the library, Angel. I never thought that he'd ever kick me out of there." The library had always been a haven for Willow. A private, safe place she could always run to whenever she was in trouble or in need of advice. Being exiled from there was like simply throwing her out undefended into the middle of the Hellmouth.

"I know he did, Willow, but I'm sure he regrets it. He was just mad at me and you were in the way," pausing, Angel recalled the way she'd stood directly in front of him, unmoving, her slight frame creating an impenetrable shield between himself and death.

"W-what you did back there," she stared at him, unwaveringly, her

green eyes still filled with tears, "It was very brave, Willow, but it was also foolish. I never want you to put yourself in harms way because of me, do you understand that?" He hadn't meant for his words to come out sounding so harsh, but he was truly scared that she'd get herself into trouble because of him some day.

"I can't make that promise, Angel. You know that," she gave him a tiny, sad smile,
> "It's just the price of friendship, I guess. You're stuck with me."
<p>

He closed his eyes and she could almost sense him blocking her out emotionally. By the time he looked back at her again, his features were completely neutral, "Get some sleep, Willow. By tomorrow morning, everything will be fine."

She nodded wordlessly and searched his eyes carefully for something, anything which would indicate his thoughts and feelings.

"Goodnight, Willow."

There it was.

A faint *something* she picked up on which told her that she'd never see him again.

She knew he'd never kill himself as he'd tried to do that night she'd changed him back, but what he could and would do is leave Sunnydale. He could very easily disappear into the night without a trace and never come back if he felt it was the 'right' thing to do.

He turned and started walking away, heading towards the steps of the porch without turning back.

And suddenly in one brief, blinding moment, everything made sense. The world and all the universe be damned, if there was one thing Willow Rosenberg had ever been sure of in her life, this was it.

She wasn't going to let him.

"Angel," she said.

He heard the fire in her voice long before he saw it in her eyes.

She reached out and caught ahold of his hand. Reluctantly, he turned back to face her.

In an almost symbolic gesture, she held up his hand, entwining her fingers in his and brought it to the threshold, "Angel," she repeated, this time more softly.

He felt a lump growing in his throat.

Staring at him, almost directly into him, with her thoughtful green eyes, she spoke the words which broke his heart and restructured his life all over again, "Angelâ€¦pleaseâ€¦come in."

And with that, the floodgates, quite literally, broke.

The invisible shield which had been both physically and emotionally separating them vanished in a flash and for what would be the second time in two weeks, Willow Rosenberg would be there to witness what used to be a very rare event.

Angel crying.

Stepping into the house, with one swift motion he lifted her up high and crushed her to him, hugging her fiercely. She shared in his tears.

"You're always welcome here, Angel. Always and forever, no matter what," she murmured into his neck.

He just held onto her for what seemed like an eternity in itself.

After several moments, Willow started fidgeting, "Angel? As much as I like you, I can't breathe."

Pulling away, he grinned at her. They were almost nose to nose and he watched as she blushed slightly, "Sorry," he whispered and lowered her to the floor.

There was an embarrassed pause as he wiped the tears from his own eyes before reaching out to do the same for her.

"Why don't you, ahhh, stay for a few hours?" she asked, sniffing hopefully up at him, "I don't think I'll be sleeping any time soon and I'd really appreciate the company."

Angel just smiled, "I think I'd like that. A lot." She was right. This was the price of friendship, and it was one he was more than willing to pay. He was, for all practical purposes, stuck with her.

And he couldn't have been happier about it.

Part 13

The library was dead silent for several minutes after Willow and Angel's exit.

The silence was finally broken by the soft sobbing of Buffy as she placed her hand on Giles arm.

The sound broke the Watcher out of his trance and suddenly the memories and events of the last few minutes came rushing back. With an immense sense of regret, he recalled what he'd last said to the recently departed teenager. Did I really just kick her out of here? Was I honestly that cruel? Dropping the crossbow limply to the floor, he knew that he'd have to call her up immediately, go over to her house if need be, in order to make amends. First things first, though, he'd have to deal with the current damage, both physical and emotional in the library itself.

Turning, he cradled the Slayer as she wept brokenly and buried her face in his shirt.

> He looked past her to Cordelia and Xander. The dark haired girl had slowly started picking up some of the scattered books and papers which had fallen to the floor when Willow had leapt across the table. Xander was just staring at an invisible spot on the floor, a slightly stunned look on his face while his hand covered half his jaw. It was already turning a nasty bluish color. <p>

"Xander, are you alright?" Giles asked hoarsely.

"She kicked me," he answered in a mechanical voice, mumbling slightly so he didn't move his mouth too much.

"Is anything broken? Shall I take you to a hospital?"

"She kicked me," he repeated.

Gently extracting himself from Buffy's embrace, he moved to the boy and started examining the injury.

"It doesn't look too bad, but I still think we should get it X-rayed."

"Was it really him?" Buffy whispered softly, "Is he really back?"

"So it appears," Giles replied, careful this time to keep his personal emotions out of things.

Cordelia walked over to stand next to them, having finished picking up most of the mess.

"Come on, Xander, let's get you to the hospital," Giles gently took ahold of the boy's sleeve and started to guide him towards the door.

"She kicked me and then sh-she went of with him," he muttered, still in disbelief.

"Yes, she did," Cordelia burst out finally, unable to stand it anymore, "she did and you beyond deserved it."

"What?" Xander asked in mild shock.

"Willow kicked you and you deserved it. You heard what I said," she stared at him, her eyes snapping dangerously, "I have never seen anyone be so completely selfish, callous and...andâ€¦JEALOUS in my entire life, Xander Harris. She's Willow for Pete's sake and you completely tore her apart. I canNOT believe some of the things you said to her. You used her relationship with Ms. Calendar against her just because you were mad that she went ahead and did something without you. That she chose someone over you. You're not fooling anyone." With that, she walked past all three of them and slammed out the door.

"She's nuts," Xander spat painfully.

"But she's right," Buffy sighed softly, "We all handled that very badly. Poor Willow. Things like this always seem to happen to her."

I'm going over to check up on her once we get you to the hospital, Xander. Afterwards, I suggest you go talk to Cordy."

> ***** <p>

They had spent the last three hours talking. Again.

At first, she'd grilled him about his conversation with Buffy. In classic Willow style, she shoved her own problems out of the way in order to help him with his. All things taken together, she honestly felt that the Slayer couldn't be away from him for too long while knowing that he'd been changed back. She was a firm believer that Buffy would come to her senses and seek Angel out sooner or later.

Once they got past the events of the night, they got to talking about their respective childhoods and Willow learned some more about Angel's past. She cherished and treasured each and every anecdote and story he told her. Her eyes glittered when one ended and she laughed and urged him to tell her another. Feeling him starting to truly open up to her, she knew how precious and rare this was for him and she was grateful for every second of it.

He, in turn, relished in hearing about her normal, if somewhat sheltered childhood. He took joy in her enthusiasm as she related the scores of embarrassing stories she had concerning Xander as well as the many adventures they'd had when they were younger.

> She loves him so much. Angel realized with a vague tinge of anger That boy is so stupid and blind. If he'd ever had a chance at love as beautiful and innocent and complete as that, he'd hold onto it and never let it go. Xander's a foolish teenager. What the boy obviously saw as a gawky and slightly awkward sisterly figure, would in fact be a tall, graceful,
 gorgeous young woman in a matter of a few years. Angel had seen it happen several times before. It wouldn't be until then when Xander would come to his senses, and at that point, Willow will have moved on. Well, it's his loss, the idiot, if he can't

> see her for what she is. He turned his attention back to her animated gesturing and realized that she'd moved on to yet another story. Something about how, in fifth grade, she and Xander had taken to competing in "funny face making contests". She was in the process of demonstrating, actually when he'd switched back to fully paying attention and he burst out laughing at her crossed eyes and stuck out tongue. She looked mildly embarrassed until he suddenly mirrored her face and she joined in, erupting into a fit of giggles herself. <p>

It was nearly five am when the threat of daybreak finally forced Angel to leave.

She walked him to the door and leaned against the frame while smiling up at him, "This was fun, Angel, thank you for this. Thank you for being there when no one else was."

He could tell that she honestly meant it and he simply smiled back at her, "I could say the same exact thing to you."

"Hey, Angel, how come you never dance? Fast dance, I mean" she asked suddenly.

He chuckled softly. Her mind was still quite an enigma to him. He didn't quite understand just where her random questions came from or how they were connected in her head but by now he'd grown used to her ability to surprise him. Besides, he didn't mind answering them nearly as much anymore.

Thinking about it for a few moments, he shrugged carelessly, "I honestly don't know. I just haven't in a fairly long time and I guess that recently, I haven't really felt like it."

She nodded at him seriously, "Well you know, you should. Dancing is good for the soul."

He shook his head good-naturedly and started walking down the porch. She waved goodbye and watched him go until he stopped suddenly on the steps and turned to her.

"Hey, Willow.."

"Yes?"

He looked slightly thoughtful before smiling at her again, "You know, you have a beautiful soul."

And with that, he walked away, humming softly to himself before finally disappearing from her view.

Part 14

She sat listlessly on the couch in the darkened room, watching reruns of Forever Knight.

> How pathetic am I? Moaning softly, she reached over for the remote and flipped
 through a few more channels before flicking the TV off and closing her eyes.

The past three days had gone a lot better than she could ever have hoped, and yet, she was still inexplicably depressed. Giles had called her less than five minutes after Angel left that day. He rather awkwardly apologized for his behavior and informed her that Xander's jaw, though it would be bruised and sore for several days, was not, in fact, broken. This piece of news was beyond joyful for Willow who'd been truly scared that she'd done actual damage to him.

Next came a visit from Buffy who spent several hours simply talking with Willow about Angel and how he felt and trying to sort out how she felt and the entire relationship mess. It was almost like old times.

After her conversation with Buffy, Willow had crawled upstairs and into her bed and had almost literally passed out, not to awaken until early evening. She missed saying goodbye to Amy who would be gone to Canada for two or three days and she regretted that but she sorely needed to catch up on sleep.

She'd spent the rest of that night alone, since Buffy went over to visit Angel and they'd "talked". Judging from the brief phone

conversation she'd had with him and the email she got from Buffy, she knew that they were patching up their relationship slowly, but surely.

Lastly, came the dreaded conversation with Xander, which hadn't really taken place until a few hours ago. He was fairly quiet throughout and she wasn't sure whether or not it was because of her or because his jaw still hurt but something told her that all had not quite been forgiven. She knew him well and from the tone of his voice she could tell that he was still deeply hurt and felt betrayed by what she'd done. Well, he'll just have to deal she thought, inexplicably annoyed and frustrated with herself. Why the heck am I in such a bad mood? Life couldn't have been any betterâ€¦Xander wasn't injured, Giles forgave me, and Buffy and Angel were back togetherâ€¦everything is back to normal. Then why do I feel so disgusted?

Sighing, she rose and walked upstairs only to flop down again on her bed.

"Oh gross," she muttered under breath as she stared at her reflection in the mirror across the room. Lack of sleep had caused dark circles to form around her eyes. With her pale complexion, she looked as if she had two huge bruises on her face. The injury she'd sustained from the arrow in the library stood out badly as well. It was relatively small, but somewhat painful when she blinked. She still hadn't figured out exactly how she was going to explain it to her parents.

Standing, she scrutinized her full body, "Ew. I'm all arms and legs an-and this teeny-weeny head. I look like a spider or something." Her long red locks drooped lifelessly at her shoulders. "Look at me. Bad hair. Bad clothes. Badâ€¦everything." She flopped backwards onto her bed in frustration, "I am the ugliest human being alive."

The phone rang, interrupting her thoughts. Growling and muttering under her breath, she reached for it. Maybe it's Xander wanting to go for round twoâ€¦

"Hello?" she asked dully.

"Willow? It's Cordelia."

"Chase?"

"Umm..yes."

The hacker's green eyes widened slightly as she sat up and tugged the phone closer to her ear, "Cordelia? Is something wrong? Is Xander okay?" she demanded.

"Who? What? Xander? Yes, of course Xander's okay. No, this has nothing to do with Xander."

She relaxed a bit, "Ohâ€¦okay."

"I was just calling to seeâ€¦ahhâ€¦how you were doing."

Who are you and what have you done with Cordelia Chase? "Wow, well, I'm doing just fine now. I talked to Xander and to Buffy and to

Xander and they're all okay, which was a big relief. I-it was very thoughtful of you to call."

"Actually, I also wanted to ask you something."

A ha. Ulterior motive. I should have known. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Okay, go ahead."

"I was wondering if you'd like to..ummâ€¦sleep over my house this Friday."

Willow almost dropped the phone, "W-what?"

"I mean, as long as you're not busy or anything," the other girl rushed on sounding somewhat embarrassed, "I'm only asking because I know that your parents are out of town. It's really gotta suck to be all by yourself in your house, especially considering everything that's happened."

Could it be possible that Cordelia Chase actually has a conscience? Nah.

> "W-well, it was very nice of you to ask, Cordelia, but I think I'll manage by myself." <p>

"Oh."

Was it her imagination or did the other girl actually sound disappointed? "I also wouldn't want to impose on you or anyth-,"

"You wouldn't be imposing at all. Actually, I was kinda looking forward to umâ€¦I dunno, getting to know you a little better I guessâ€¦."

This time, Willow did drop the phone.

Scrambling to pick it up quickly she managed to entangle herself in the cord, "Get t-to know me?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it looks like we have a lot in common."

"Like?" the redhead challenged skeptically, trying to disengage the plastic wire from around her ankle.

There was silence as Cordelia thought about the question, "Xander."

Willow paused. Good point. "That's true."

"So, you in?" she was growing tired of this game.

"I guess so." The hacker agreed reluctantly.

"Coolness, I'll see you then."

"Great."

"Later," Cordelia replied shortly before hanging up.

Willow simply stared at the phone in her head. Just when I thought life couldn't get any
> weirderâ€| <p>

He felt guilty.

There was a shocker.

Angel rolled over on his bed to stare at the ceiling. The shades were firmly pulled throughout the apartment making it almost pitch-black.

Buffy had come over to talk to him yesterday morning, just like Willow promised.

> In fact, he had a sneaking suspicion that Willow had a lot to do with her visit. The slayer had even come back at night after her patrols. Yes, he was really starting to patch things up with Buffy and yet he still felt this gnawing guilt which couldn't really be attributed to anything in particular. He realized, with an odd pang of emptiness, that he hadn't seen Willow for the past few days. At least not since the morning she'd invited him in. He should really call her to see how she was doing. <p>

But he couldn't.

Every time he tried to pick up the phone to call her or went to his door to go visit her, or even thought about her, he felt instantly guilty. Almost as if he were being unfaithful somehow.

It didn't make any sense at all.

Granted she was brilliant, honest, sincere, funny, strong and comfortable to be around. And yes, she was also generous, tender, sweet, innocent and kind. Of course even he had to admit that she was prettyâ€|well, beautiful was probably more accurate, especially when she smiled.

Remembering her bright and sometimes mischievous smiles, Angel soon found himself grinning. The instant he became conscious of it, of course, he stopped.

And while it was true that she'd risked her own life to save his on at least three separate occasions, there wasn't any chance in hell that he had actual feelings for her. No, Willow was a pal, a confidant, a friend. That was it. He cherished her companionship more than anyone else's. There was no way what he was feeling was anything beyond simple friendship. With Buffyâ€|well, it was pretty different. Extremely different, in fact. From the instant he'd set eyes on the stunning blonde slayer, he'd fallen head over heels for her. Love at first sight, that's what that had been. The first times their eyes had met, the first time she'd ever touched himâ€|it had set his whole body on fire.

With Willow, it wasn't like that. It was completely the opposite. The situation was very simple. He had been in trouble and she'd stepped

in. He was grateful that's all.

Exactly.

Just friendship and companionship, nothing more.

Yes.

She was merely a confidant. Someone to turn to when things weren't going too well.

Absolutely.

Hmmmâ€¦

This could be a problem.

Feeling a slight prickling sensation at the bottom of his spine, Angel turned his attention to the door seconds before someone started banging on it.

"Coming," he called, pausing to pull a shirt on over his head. Maybe it's Willow!

Pushing a few articles of clothing under his bed and absently tidying up the apartment, he made his way towards the door. Quickly, he whipped it open.

"Oh, Buffy."

Abruptly suppressing the automatic flash of disappointment, he held the door open a bit wider, "Shouldn't you be on patrol or something?"

"Yeah, well, hi to you too," she replied, obviously agitated and clutching her neck.

"Is everything ok-," he began as she roughly pushed past him and headed into his apartment.

"Okay? Well, no, not really," she called over her shoulder before entering the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind her.

"Buffy?" he followed her curiously, "Buffy what's going on?"

There were several seconds of silence as he stood by the locked door and listened to the water running from within.

Finally, the blonde slayer emerged with a white bandage around the left side of her delicate throat.

Angel's eyes widened, "Are you alright??"

The slayer snickered slightly to herself before taking a seat on the sofa, "As 'alright' as you can be after being bitten by a vampire."

Part 15

"So yes, Vancouver was, in a word, awesome."

"That's so great."

"Although I have to admit that there were a few close calls with my aunt and uncle. There was this one time, just after we crossed the border, that I swore one of them would zap the other into oblivion they were fighting so much. I was hoping that it would be my uncle and not my aunt since she was driving and all. It really amazes me that they've lived together for so long.

> Oh, and did you see those signs they put up all over town?" <p>

"No, I haven't really left the house these past few days."

"Well that's healthy."

"You're not helping."

"Sorry. Anyway, there's some 'theme night' deal at the Bronze."

Willow groaned, "Okay, let's hear it."

"This Saturday it's 'swing'."

"Oh, well that's not too bad."

"That's what I said. In fact, I think we should go. It'd be cool. I could just conjure us

> up some authentic looking clothes, not to mention a few guides on exactly how to swing danceâ€|" <p>

"That sounds greatâ€|hey, you know what? That reminds me, Amy, we actually have another commitment that night."

"Really?"

"Yeahâ€|" Willow crossed her fingers nervously, "We've been invited toâ€|umm..a private party."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"You don't sound to excited," the blonde paused suspiciously, "Why do you not sound excited?"

"It's not really a big deal...it's just thatâ€|wellâ€|"

"Spit it out."

"It's at Cordelia's house." She instantly held the telephone receiver arms length away from her ear in preparation for the inevitable screaming. Much to her surprise, she didn't happen.

Amy was too busy laughing hysterically.

Cautiously, Willow returned the phone to its original position,
"A-Amy?"

The other girl erupted into a fit of giggles, "Cordelia's house?? Cordelia-I'm-such-a-skank-I-can-barely-believe-it-myself Chase invited us to a party? That's a good one Will," she gasped shouting into the receiver, "Yeah, and I'll bet she even invited us to sleep over." With that, she started giggling all over again.

The hacker was somewhat less than amused, "Actually, she did."

Almost as abruptly as the laughter had begun, it stopped.

"What?"

"Cordelia called. She invited me to sleep over, I said yes. She called back later and I mentioned that you might want to come too."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I dunno, I just thought it would be a nice way for us to all get together and to get to know one another."

"Are you on crack?"

"No, I'm serious, Am-,"

"WILLOW. I-I can't believe you. Are you insane? Have you forgotten all of the hell that girl put us through? I might be the witch in name, but Cordelia Chase is more of one in spirit than I'll ever be."

"Amyâ€| "

"How about that time in third grade when she cheated off of you during a spelling test and then framed you for it? Or in seventh grade when she tripped you down that flight of stairs and you broke your arm? Are you totally forgetting the 'We Hate Cordelia Club' of which you were the founder AND president? Jesse was the vice president, I was the secretary and Xander > was the treasurer. Granted, we disbanded when we found out that Xander had been embezzling funds to buy ice cream, but let me tell you, that organization had promise!" <p>

"AMY!"

"What about the bitchy 'Hey Willow, I see you've found the softer side of Sears' comments she made all through ninth and tenth grade? How can you forgive her so easily? H-How can you just agree to go into her house? It's like official enemy territory for pete's sakes."

"Amy, now you're just overreacting. Look, this was NOT a simple decision. You weren't in the library that night when Angel showed up and Giles went nuts and there was all that fighting. She actually stood up for me. I mean, she's been trying to be nicer lately and, well, I just think we should give her the benefit of the doubt."

"Good grief."

"I'm serious."

There was a brief period of silence as both girls were lost in thought.

"Amy?" Willow finally ventured cautiously.

"Fine."

"What?"

"Fine, I'll go."

"Thank you," she beamed.

"You know that I'm only doing this for you, right?"

"Yes, I do, and I appreciate it immensely."

"Only because you're my friend."

"And you're mine."

"I hope you realize that am giving up a perfectly good Saturday night to enter the BOWELS OF HELL all because you're my
> friend." <p>

"Amy?"

"Yeah?"

"You can stop now."

Willow stifled a giggle and Amy just frowned.

"All I'm saying is that if she so much as mentions the word
"makeover" I'm turning her into a rat."

"It's a deal."

Part 16

"And you have absolutely no idea who attacked you?"

"None whatsoever. Just some anonymous chic vamp, who, might I add, did some serious damage," the slayer paused to point at the bandage on her neck, "My mom is not gonna buy ANY story I come up with to explain this one. Oh, there's one thing that I do remember, the male vampire she was with mentioned something about you 'betraying the clan'."

Angel frowned.

"That means something to you?"

"It might," He took a deep breath, "Over the past 3 weeks, Spike's group, or 'clan' as they refer to themselves, were in preparation of a rather large takeover. This plan was halted and rescheduled once I regained my soul, at least according to what I've been told by my sources, however, I'm still privy to some very delicate information on terms of where certain people and things are located. Much of these things can't be moved very quickly or easily."

Buffy nodded slowly, "So you kinda know where their secret base is?"

"In a way."

"Then let's go nuke em. How come you didn't mention all this before?"

"No, Buffy, we can't do anything to them right now. I think that what they did to you was just a warning. They are, however, very capable of doing much much more. Let's just say that Spike wasn't very pleased when he found out I'd switched sides."

"I can handle them."

"But can Willow? O-or Xander for that matter? What about Giles? Cordelia? Buffy, they aren't at all above attacking your friends to get to you. They know where you live, what you do, and what your weaknesses are. They know who you're friends are, when they're alone and when they're unprotected. It's a skill they learned from me, I'm afraid," he sat down next to her and put his head in his hands.

"Angel, don't blame yourself for this," the slayer sighed softly and inched closer to him,

> "You weren't in control then. You've risked your own life so many times just to save ours. You would never endanger anyone, I know that and so does everyone else. Trust me, we'll figure something out." <p>

He nodded slowly and turned his head to give her a grateful smile.

Big mistake.

She smiled back and leaned closer, a mildly seductive gleam in her eyes, "You know Angel," she said softly, "I've been thinking a lot about us, in general."

He felt his heartbeat pick up almost automatically, the way it always did whenever she was close, "And?"

"And I think that we should maybe talk about things more," she leaned even closer and he could feel her breath on his cheek, "consider our options."

He gently touched the side of her face, brushing her blond locks away from her eyes, "Options?"

She smiled again and brushed her lips against his, "I think it should be fine as long as we take things slowly."

The kiss that followed, was, well, amazing. Angel felt his body respond in the same way it always did when he was with Buffy.

And yet, something was very wrong.

Certainly his skin was heating up rapidly wherever she came in contact, nevertheless, there was something deep in his mind and in his soul which was literally screaming in protest.

Reluctantly, he broke away from her and stood up, "You're right, I think we should take this slowly."

She looked a bit surprised, "Angel, is something wrong?"

"No, not at all," unable to return her gaze he turned around and picked up his jacket.

"W-where are you going?"

"I'm going to take a walk. Maybe do some checking up on who attacked you and what's going on."

"Now?" she asked, shocked.

"Well, yes. It'd be a good idea if you stayed here until I got back."

"Yeah. Great."

He couldn't miss the intense sound of disappointment in her voice and it broke his heart.

> Turning slightly, he glanced over at her as he opened the door, "I'll be back soon," he said, throwing her a lopsided grin. <p>

She nodded, "Be careful."

"I will."

"Angel, I lo-,"

He closed the door behind him.

"-ve you," Buffy finished softly.

There was no response.

Part 17

She had long since changed out of her clothes and was now sitting, barefoot, in a thin white nightgown. Thoughtfully, she stared at the rows of black and white keys before hitting one. The note ran out so clear and loudly that it brought tears to her eyes.

Life was, as Willow had come to realize, very strange.

She sighed softly and stared at the shiny black surface of the piano. It had been almost two hours since she'd hung up the phone after

talking to Amy and the house was dead silent.

Not that this was really anything new. She was used to being by herself. For instance, this entire past week her parents had been out of town.

But in that time, Willow had never really felt lonely. Not like she did now.

Thinking about things was a rather nasty habit she'd picked up during her childhood. Unfortunately, her seemingly endless loneliness gave her a lot of time to do just that. And while she'd been busy thinking, a few somewhat frightening thoughts had entered her head. Thoughts which refused to go away and which couldn't be dismissed. Thoughts about Angel.

In frustration, the redhead slammed her fist into the keys, producing an oddly comforting discordant sound.

She missed him.

Using both of her hands this time, she pounded out a sad and painful chord.

It was more than that, though. Even she wasn't so naïve and stupid.

In pure irritation and a desperate need to escape her own mind, she turned her full attention to the piano.

All her life, things like this seemed to happen to her. Nothing could ever be simple.

Starting off shakily, she started to play. The song she chose was sad and wistful but had an undercurrent of strength.

It made her almost sick to admit it, but it was true. In all the time she'd known him, she never thought anything like _this could happen. She'd never been in a position for anything like this to happen. Mentally, she'd kicked herself for_ _being so easy, for being so vulnerable. Past experience alone should have made her more cautious._

Her playing rose to an almost frenzied pitch as she reached the chorus of the song. She actually began sweating from the exertion as the tears sprang to her eyes, blinding her ability to see the keys.

Maybe she could pull back, pull away from the situation. Maybe she could just close herself off and it would go away.

Crying openly now, she forced herself to close her eyes and to play the song completely by feel. In her heart, she remembered how and when her fingers were supposed to strike the keys. The music was so loud that it could be heard clearly across the street through the open window.

She knew though, that she couldn't. She wasn't Buffy or Cordelia. She was Willow. Poor, stupid, pathetic little Willow _Rosenberg. And once she grew emotionally involved or attached to someone, she could

never get away. Besides, it was_ _too late._

She had already fallen in love with him.
> <p>

He stood under the street lamp, staring at her through the open window. He was almost mesmerized by her playing.

He leaned against the lamppost, a concerned look flashing through his dark eyes. Is she unhappy? Did something happen? I should have visited or called her sooner. He silently berated himself over and over again.

Somehow, his 'walk' had taken him past the Rosenberg residence, as it had several times in the past. Feeling only somewhat guilty that he wasn't currently researching who had attacked Buffy and why, Angel gradually began to relax.

Maybe I'm reading too much into this.

The rest of the street was dark. Most lights were off since the neighbors were either asleep or had left town for vacation. He wondered absently why Willow had opted to stay during these two weeks as opposed to going to Boston with her parents. Maybe she had something more important to take care of in town. Schoolwork or that sort of thing.

Shrugging, he pushed off of the post and prepared to go on his way. He didn't want to disturb her, after all.

Once he was out of the glare of the overhead light, however, he got a better look at her. She's playing with her eyes closed. Smiling internally, he hummed along with her playing while starting to cross the street. Talented girl. That's when he saw something else. Wait-is she crying? The smile vanished altogether and his entire face darkened.

> What's going on? Standing stock still now, he stared across at her openly. The entire scene had shifted in a matter of seconds. She was obviously in serious distress over something, but what? He growled under his breath, If that idiot Xander said or did somethingâ€| Yet again, Angel was reminded of the moronic, hormonally challenged teenager who couldn't see what was right under his nose even if it hit him in the head. Although Xander's stupidity wasn't a shock to Angel, it bothered him that Willow was so affected by it. <p>

Ironically, it was then that she opened her eyes. The song was ending and he hadn't even noticed. In a sudden fit of panic, Angel realized that he was essentially out in the wide open, smack in the middle of the street, staring like a fool through the window of a seventeen-year-old. She'll probably think I'm stalking her or somethingâ€|

All fears vanished, however, when her green eyes turned their gaze, almost casually, out the window. She sent him a small smile as she hit the final note of the song. Slowly, she stood, pushed the bench away from the piano, and left the room.

Angel watched her leave, his heartbeat quickening inexplicably.

Fully expecting the vampire to have left by the time she got there, Willow opened her front door anyway. Much to her surprise, she found him standing on the porch.

She grinned at him shyly and he grinned back. There was almost an warmth, an aura of some sort that followed the hacker wherever she went. It had a tendency to put Angel at ease and to make him want to share things with her. It made him want her to be comfortable.

They stared at each other for a few seconds before she started fidgeting self-consciously. Suddenly, she remembered what she was wearing and how she must look. In an attempt to explain her unkempt appearance, she took a deep breath and opened her mouth, only to find that he'd done the exactly same thing.

Blushing slightly she shook her head and silently urged him to speak first.

I've never seen such expressive eyes "Iâ€|ahhâ€|I used to come here a lot," he began cautiously, "Even before I lost my soul. I'd just come walking..kind of late at night. I'd stop by that lamp post across the street."

She nodded.

"Ever since last year. After I came into your room for the first time when I needed your help. You remember, when I wanted to ask you about Buffy's ex-boyfriend. I mean, then I knew where you lived. I'd come by after that just to listen to you play. You're very talented."

She shook her head and stared at the floor, "How are things with you and Buffy?" she whispered softly.

Somewhat surprised by the change of subject, Angel frowned, "We're okay, she came by tonight. Actually, she's still at my apartment."

"Really?" Willow was careful to keep every hint of emotion out of her voice.

"Yes. We've been talking a lot lately." Why won't she look at me?
"Willow, is something wrong?"

Almost instantly, she glanced up at him, "N-no, I'm fine." It was strange for someone to be so perceptive to her feelings and thoughts. Normally, it was the other way around. She was the one listening to everyone else's problems. She'd have to learn to be more careful around him. "I've just been thinking a lot lately."

"About?" he prodded gently.

She sighed, "Nothing important."

"Willow, anything you think about is important."

His conviction surprised her a bit and even embarrassed her to a

certain extent. She dropped her gaze yet again.

Feeling a bit more willing to venture out first in building up a sense of trust between them, he decided to offer up a confession of his own, "Buffy actually kissed me tonight."

There were additional moments of silence and the hacker almost seemed to have trouble breathing. Angel furrowed his brows and waited for her to respond.

"Oooh, that'sâ€¦that's justâ€¦.great," she pretty much choked out.

She still refuses to look at me. Angel sighed.

Leaning against the edge of the doorway, near her head, he let out a soft laugh, "Not really."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explainâ€¦I-I just didn't react very well to it." He gently touched the side of her face and bent closer to get a better look at it.

She glanced up at him again, their noses just inches apart, "Why?"

"Something was wrong. I can't place it. Something just didn'tâ€¦fit anymore. I think I wasn't really comfortable. It was a weird situation to be in. I've always felt so open with Buffy in the past. I guess there are just some things that take longer to fix than others. It's a good thing I have you to talk to."

Something in her green eyes lit up just a bit and he smiled, it felt nice to make her happy. He was glad she was beginning to trust him and that she could tell he trusted her. "It's a shame, though. That was one hell of a kiss," he joked.

The light died almost instantly and she pulled away from him. His own smile faded.

> What did I say? <p>

"Th-that'sâ€¦nice. Listen, Angel, I hate to do this to you, but it's pretty late. I should be going to bed. I have some research to do tomorrow for Giles and all."

"Oh," he straightened up as well, "Alright, no problem."

"Goodnight," She quickly backed into the house and started to close the door.

"Wait-Willow, would you like to do something with me tomorrow, though?"

She paused. The door was almost completely shut and all he could see were her eyes. Those two, beautiful, dark green eyes. They were full of tears.

"I..umm..I don't think that's a good idea Angel. I have a lot to do

tomorrow. Maybe some other night."

He nodded, openly disappointed. She was shutting him out, both physically as well as emotionally. Something was happening and she was obviously holding it back from him. There was so much pain and loneliness in those green eyes.

The door softly clicked shut and he sighed.

The same kind of loneliness reflected in his soul.

Part 18

Amy couldn't believe it.

She was already a full forty minutes into the "slumber party" and she honestly hadn't had the urge to kill Cordelia.

Even now, as the self-involved brunette happily spread a yogurt and oatmeal based relaxation mask on her face, she was actually enjoying it.

"So, yeah. If you keep this on for about 20 minutes, it'll look great once we wash it off.

> It'll get rid of all of those stress wrinkles you've been having and the blotchiness in
 your complexion. Cause, you know, that makes you look really kinda gross."

Well, no one was perfect.

"Cordy, have you seen Willow?"

The dark haired cheerleader finished placing cucumber slices on the other girl's eyes and paused to look around, "Nope. I think she's in the other room watching TV or something. Some old show called Kindred: The Embrace, I think. The lead guy is really hot, that's why I remember," she lowered her voice, "We've really got to do something about her.."

Amy frowned, "Who, Willow?"

"She is getting into this really sulky vibe. Not that I blame her, but still. It's not healthy..have you seen her hair? Come to think of it, we should fix it before we go to the Bronze."

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

"Willow's been hanging around, pouting, and not eating or sleeping. Have you seen
> how thin and pale she is? What kind of friend are you?" <p>

"Hang on, Cordelia, what are you saying?"

"Well, I mean, hel-loâ€|it's beyond obvious that she totally wants him."

Amy's blood literally ran cold, "Him?" she asked weakly.

"Well duh. Angel!," she hissed.

Amy looked vaguely ill.

"It's sooo there. I mean, when she talks about him and her face lights up like a little puppy-dog? It's borderline pathetic. I mean, they'd make a cute couple and all, but it's like neither of them are going to make a move. It's impossible."

What?! Sitting up, the witch took the cucumbers off of her eyes in one quick gesture, "Wait, are you saying that you think Angel actually likes Willow?"

"Shhh!!" Cordelia sank down next to Amy's chair with a conspiratorial smile, "You weren't in the library that night, were you?"

"Noâ€|

"You should have SEEN the look on his face when she stood in front of him, like RIGHT in front of the crossbow!" She was in full-fledged gossip mode.

"It wasâ€|intense?"

"Like, beyond. I was so surprised, I couldn't believe it. I mean, I was sorta distracted by the fact that Xander was acting like an ass and all, but there was NO WAY you could miss the look on Angel's face."

"Cordelia, I wasn't there. You need to be more explicit."

"He was, like, in awe."

"You mean it?" Amy could barely contain her excitement, "Oh wow. W-we need to tell her."

"Are you dense? We can't tell her."

"Why?"

"Well A. she'd never believe us and 2. she'd get all nervous around him. No, we can't tell her."

"Cordelia, no offense, but that's about the dumbest thing I've heard in a long time. If we clue her in, she'll know and she'll be happier around him. Right now I think she's sending mixed signals in his direction without realizing it. If we tell her, it'll probably work to get them together."

"Look, I hate to bring this up, but do you have a boyfriend?"

"Well, no."

"Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

"What's your point?"

"My point is that I have a lot more experience in this than you do."

Amy paused, "Point taken."

"Great, then we're agreed."

"Agreed to what? What are we supposed to do??"

The conspiratorial smile returned and Cordelia's dark eyes sparkled, "Not so fast. First, we need a planâ€¦"

**

Willow sat staring blankly at the flickering images on the television.

I can't believe I did that to Angel yesterday night. For the hundredth time that day, she cringed as she recalled the hurt look in his eyes when she'd shut the door in his face. That was NOT something

> that a good friend does. <p>

Moaning, she slowly leaned sideways and fell onto the couch. Not to mention the fact that tomorrow is his birthday.

Although the vampire hadn't told her, she'd managed to "sneak a peek" at some of Giles' diaries while she was helping to research that morning. After picking up this little fact, she'd taken some time to secretly sift through some of Amy's spell books to see if she could conjure up a good gift.

It had taken almost an hour, but Willow knew what she wanted to give him. Granted the spell was a bit complex, but she had faith in her growing capabilities when it came to the black arts.

Heck, I restored his soul, how bad can it be?

The excursion to the library itself had been more than just informative. It had also served to help patch up her relationship with the Giles. Although somewhat awkward at first, the visit proved to be very successful. Despite herself, Willow grinned as she recalled how the librarian had gone scurrying around the room, cleaning off her workspace, dusting the computer keyboard, and bringing her cushions to sit on throughout the day. He'd even brought her tea and crumpets before lunch, all the while asking if she wanted anything else. Giles was literally in hyperdrive when it came to making amends.

She appreciated every second of it though. Sometimes it was hard to remember that people actually cared about her. It was nice to receive a reminder every now and then.

"Hey! Ready to go?"

Glancing up at the door, she saw Amy standing in front of her, grinning a little too broadly.

Cordelia's head popped up over her shoulder. She was sporting a matching facial expression.

Glancing warily from one girl to the other, she sighed softly.

Terrific, now what?

It was almost 10 and Angel felt like a nervous teenager. He hovered silently in
> the darkest corner of the Bronze, his eyes skillfully skimming the faces before him. <p>

Where the heck is she?

He felt terrible about ignoring her these past few days and felt even worse after she'd closed the door on him the night before. I'm going to make it up to her if it's the last thing I do.

Tapping his foot absently against the floor, he thrust his hands into his pockets and hummed along to the music.

As long as she shows up first.

As if on cue, Cordelia suddenly appeared at the far end of the room. The dark haired cheerleader was clad in a deep red dress which, although decidedly vintage in style, clung around her hips in a very suggestive manner. It was also cut very high. On the left, she was flanked by Amy whose clothing was extremely similar. In fact, the only difference between them was that Cordelia's was maroon and Amy's was a dark blue which matched her eyes.

But where's Willow?

After a few tense moments, he got his answer.

Following several feet behind, he spotted the red-head as she cautiously made her way through the crowd.

Keeping his mouth from dropping open on sight became a conscious effort the instant he took in her slender frame.

"Ohâ€|.wow," he breathed softly.

**

Even she had to admit that the outfit was pretty amazing. Willow smiled nervously and shifted her weight to her other foot. Her
> dark red hair was parted down the middle, rolled back and pinned on either side of her head. It fell in gentle waves down her back and shoulders. The dress she wore was white with dark green flowers which matched her eyes. Although somewhat short for her own tastes, it still came past mid-thigh. The heels on her feet were a bit shorter than the ones Cordelia and Amy had on, but almost the same style. <p>

Squinting through the smoky darkness she tried to see through the bodies which were gyrating to the music. Altogether, the scene was incredible. Tons of people had turned out to dance to the live band. Many of them were good. Very good. She'd had no idea that so many residents of Sunnydale were such accomplished swing dancers.

Her mouth fell open as an especially impressive couple flew by. Thus far, she'd looked on in awe as they jumped, spun, twirled and kicked. This time, the male suddenly flipped his partner over his arm and caught her just before she hit the ground. The woman simply laughed and fell back in step with ease. Willow was rapidly starting to realize that the few basic steps she'd picked up from Cordy earlier in the evening were nothing in comparison.

To her left, Amy and Cordelia were sitting at a corner table, scanning the crowd as well.
> Xander sat with them, although a little ways off. He gazed darkly at the table in front of him while nursing a coke. <p>

Grabbing the other girl's arm, Amy let out a barely contained squeal, "There he is! There he is!!"

Cordelia snapped around to look, "Oh my ever lovin God..check him out."

"Meeee-ow," Amy nodded her head in agreement, "And she looks just like Heather Graham from Swingers in that dress."

"Uh huh. Dead ringer."

Silently, they high fived each other while bouncing up and down.

Xander just rolled his eyes.

Totally oblivious to the ongoing conversation going on just out of her earshot, Willow swayed slightly to the music. Ooh, Is that him near the bar? Standing on her toes, she leaned forward to get a better view. An especially upbeat song had just started playing and the dancing was escalating to an almost frenzied pace.

That's when she felt an hand on her shoulder, "Can I have this dance?"

Spinning around, she had to suppress the urge to gasp out loud.

There, standing right in front of her, fully decked out in a dark-grey pinstriped suit with a white flower in the lapel, was Angel. His already stunning good looks were only enhanced by the sharp clothing. There was no doubt in her mind that the outfit was completely authentic.

"May I?" he reiterated the question, a slightly roguish grin on his face, "Have this dance?" he extended a hand to her.

Entirely flustered, Willow blushed just about every existing shade of red, "Oh-of course."

Not needing any further invitation than that, his gentlemanly demeanor vanished instantly, only to be replaced by a decidedly devilish gleam in his dark eyes. Grabbing her arm, he snapped her body against his and spun them both out into the middle of
> the dance floor. <p>

Within a matter of a few seconds, Willow found herself in the very thick of things. Positive that she must have run over at least 12 different people as he unceremoniously yanked her into the mass of bodies, she tripped along behind him, apologizing all the way. Her apologies died in her throat the instant he turned back. The almost predatory look on his face scared the living daylights out of her. Has he changed back? Oh my gosh!

As if sensing her fear, Angel's features softened slightly and he winked at her flirtatiously, "Ready?"

Without waiting for her to reply, he grasped both of her hands and swung them outwards, then inwards, moving to the rhythm of the music. Quickly, she picked up the beat and followed his lead. The first few seconds remained sedate enough until the band suddenly went into an almost insanely fast riff and she felt her feet losing contact with the floor. Shrieking in surprise, she was hauled over his shoulder, and thrown backwards, flipping upside down for a brief instant before landing safely behind him, her back to his. Before she could even turn back around, she felt herself being lifted yet again and spun into the air before being
> caught easily in his well-muscled arms. <p>

He held her up to his chest so they were almost eye level and chuckled good-naturedly at the shaken expression on her face.

"Put me down!" she ground out through clenched teeth.

"Sure, if you say so," he shrugged casually and started to lower her to the floor. Just as her toes brushed the ground, though, he whipped her outwards, careening right into the crowd. A split second before she fell over, he snagged her hand and snapped her to a halt before spinning her back into him.

Now nestled comfortably and safely in his arms, Willow felt a dark, burning rage build slowly inside her. How DARE he? How dare he just throw me around like I was some sort of rag doll or something, I swear I'm going to!

Her thoughts were interrupted by a strange sound.

Angel burst out laughing.

Looking up, horrifically annoyed, she made eye contact.

"I'm sorry, but the look on your face," he shook his head helplessly, ".it's just priceless."

Normally, this sort of reaction would have made the red-haired hacker even angrier but the rarity of the event itself made her smile. Granted, she'd amused in the past, she'd occasionally even made him chuckle but this was the first time she'd ever heard him laugh out loud. I've made Angel happy. Honest to goodness happy.

Before she could get too self-congratulatory though, she felt him shifting his weight.

Uh oh.

As he swung her out again, she caught her breath. Luckily, he just grinned kindly and held her to the simple box step.

Oh thank goodness. The song was finally winding down and she felt herself relax as her eyes wandered up to his. Damn, he's a good dancer. Why would anyone this good not want to flaunt it? Why was he flaunting it now? What the heck is going on? "Angel, what's gotten into you?" she yelled above the din of the crowd.

Not responding, he spun her out gently, causing her skirt to float higher up her thighs.

Wow. Matching green underwear, huh? Angel raised an appreciative eyebrow.

Catching his gaze, she narrowed her eyes indignantly as he pulled her back into the box step. He simply chuckled, "Well, a wise woman once said, that dancing was good for the soul," he began.

She started giggling as she recalled their conversation, "Oh really?" she shouted back.

He nodded vigorously, "And you know what?" he asked.

"What?" she shouted back.

Yanking her to the side and gripping her waist wordlessly, he supported her with one hand while flipping her over his extended arm. Grabbing her again once she hit the ground, he spun her around into an embrace and dipped her low all in once fluid motion.

Willow felt her world grind to a complete stop the instant the music ended.

His nose hovered right above her own and he smiled seductively.

"I think that she was right."

5. part 5

Part 20

The next song happened to be somewhat slower. Really slow, actually. Almost automatically, she felt a slight shiver run through her body as she gazed up into his dark eyes.

"Angel, you can let me up now," she giggled, still stuck in their partial

> embrace and leaning backwards at an odd angle. <p>

"Oops, sorry," he grinned back at her and gently righted them both.

Shooting him her classic awkward Willow-smile, she tucked her hair behind her ear and eased backwards to head over to her table. Much to her surprise, he snagged ahold of her hand and pulled her back.

"Where are you going?" he asked, honestly confused.

"Ohâ€¦I didn't think thatâ€¦.well, back to my tableâ€¦be-becauseâ€¦.", she stammered incoherently as he slid his arm around her waist comfortable and took ahold of her hand.

His eyes sparkled slightly and she placed her other hand on his shoulder. It was weird to slow-dance with someone. A lot weirder than fast-dancing. Things weren't as frantic and > fly-away. They were a lot more sedate. Which gave one more time toâ€¦think. Besides, her palms were getting sweaty. <p>

"Where'd your cut go?" he asked, gently brushing his fingertips just under her eye where > the injury from the arrow would have been. <p>

"Oh, it's..gone. Amy healed it for me."

Angel raised his eyebrows, "Getting stronger then, isn't she?"

Willow simply nodded nervously in response.

"I've actually been meaning to talk to you," he hissed softly into her ear as they began to sway comfortably together to the music.

"About?"

"Well, about my behavior these past few weeks."

"YOUR behavior?" she asked, a hint of incredulity entering her voice.

"I'm sorry forâ€¦shutting you out. It was pretty wrong of me. I didn't mean to, well, make you feel like I'd abandoned you as a friend. If I did, I'm sorry."

She shook her head in disbelief, "Angel, you have nothing to apologize about, believe me. I mean, I was the one who basically slammed the door in your face." She glanced up at him, "I felt so guilty about that. I really shouldn't have..acted the way I did. I'm sorry for doing that to you. Good friends don't do that to each other and if anyone should be guilty of abandoning someone, well, it's me."

His eyes met hers and there was a moment of silence before he laughed softly, "We're both so good at this, aren't we?"

Nodding, Willow smiled thoughtfully, "Yeah. We do have a tendency to beat ourselves up over a lot of things."

Spinning around gently, they moved farther back on the dance floor. She's wearing lilac perfume. he realized. It smelled nice.

"How's Buffy?"

A shadow crossed over his features at the change of subject, "She'sâ€¦well."

"What's going on with the two of you?"

"I don't know."

"Angel..," she began, a warning tone in her voice. He wasn't going to get away from the question that easily.

"Alright, alright," if he was going to share this with anyone, as is it was probably going to be Willow, "Truthfully, I'm not sure what she's thinking anymore. Sometimes she acts as if she wants to reconcile, and other times she acts as though she doesn't. Like after I returned to my apartment last night, she was really..upset."

"What happened?" the hacker prodded gently.

"Well, first she was really quietâ€|and then there was a whole lot of yelling and then
> it got a little violent." <p>

"Violent?"

"She, um, broke one of my paperweights. Then she accused me of not caring about her anymore, and I didn't know what to say and then she just walked out. I ran after her
> and brought her back to my apartment and we talked for the rest of the night. We both cooled down and apologized to each other butâ€|" <p>

"But?"

"But then she got that cold look in her eyes again. It's like one instant she wants to forgive and she wants to get back together and the next there's this indefinable guilt that she carries around."

"Because of Ms. Calendar," Willow said softly.

Angel nodded his head, " I..ahh..I think that has a lot to do with it," his voice caught for a second.

It was so subtle that most people wouldn't have picked up on it, but she heard it almost instantly. Squeezing his arm in a show of moral support she gave him a comforting smile.

"I mean, being the slayer is hard enough as is without having this as added baggage."

"Do you think she still loves you?"

"I-I used to. I think a part of her still does and that part forces her to try to work things out. But I don't know if we can ever get past everything that's happened. I mean, I don't want to feel that she's forcing herself to reconcile just for me."

"I remember the look on her face when Ms. Calendar died," Willow began quietly, "She just sat there on the floor without saying so much as one word. I cried over it for a few days afterwards, but I never once remember Buffy shedding so much as a tear. I mean, she couldn't. She was the slayer. It was her responsibility to save everyone else. She needed to be strong for the rest of the world." It

was a painful subject, but one which needed to be discussed, "I think that in the process, she never really dealt with it. She just kinda pushed it to the back of her head. I know she felt responsible for it though. I mean, loves all of us, but Giles holds a special place in her life. He was soâ€|hurt when Ms. Calendar died. Buffy never quite got over that. She hated herself for not having the power to destroy the demon when she had the chance."

Angel looked away, "She'll never have any idea how sorry I am about that."

"I tried to explain to her that she wasn't responsible..that NO ONE was responsible

> for what happened," forcefully, Willow put her hand on his face and drew his eyes to her own, "I will never forgive the demon for what it did. I hate it for killing Ms. Calendar, and I hate it for making Xander so distant. I hate it for destroying a part of Giles and I hate it for hurting me." <p>

He stared at her in shock. Gently, he started to pull out of their embrace but she grabbed his arm.

"And most of all, I hate the demon for what it did to you. For how it controlled your body, manipulated your mind and hurt you both physically and emotionally."

"Willow, I am the demon, it's a part of me that can't be sep-,"

"No you're not," she replied, "You can say it all you want but you're not. I know that much."

He just sighed, "Buffy doesn't seem to think so."

"Do you still love her?"

The question startled him. "W-what?"

"Do you still love Buffy?"

"I-Iâ€|yes. Of course I do."

Willow smiled almost sadly. It was now or never. In her heart, she knew she had to make a decisionâ€|

"You..," she lowered her gaze I can't. , "you need to make sure she knows," she glanced back up, "If you love herâ€|you need to tell her."

There was a pause and he concentrated on her face almost as if trying to gauge her emotions.

She held his gaze unwaveringly.

Bending closer, he gently touched the side of her face, "Willow, I-,"

"Mind if I cut in?"

Craning her neck, Willow saw the very subject of their conversation standing behind her.

"Buffy!" forcing a cheerful smile, she pulled away from Angel, "Sure, of course you can."

"Thanks," the slayer grinned back.

Willow stepped aside, giving room for the other girl to take her place. Buffy was wearing one of her classic outfits. A black miniskirt with a pale lavender halter top. Her blond hair was curled for the evening and fell around her face in careless wisps. Her standard black boots completed the outfit, making her look edgy and somewhat dangerous. Which she was.

Pure Buffy Willow thought as she watched the slayer melt easily into Angel's arms.

> The hacker looked almost frumpy in comparison. Throwing them both a half-hearted wave, she glued her gaze to the floor and made her way to the exit.

> The table Amy and Cordelia had been sitting at was now empty. Cordy was dancing with Xander and Amy was sitting near the bar, carrying on a very animated discussion with two boys Willow recognized as members of the crew team. <p>

Suddenly she felt very very tired. Drained.

Suddenly unable to deal with anyone anymore, she shrugged and grabbed her purse from the deserted booth. Turning, she brushed a few tears out of her eyes and left the Bronze alone.

> <p>

Noting the distracted look on her partner's face, Buffy turned her head and followed his gaze, "Angel, what's wrong? What's going on?"

Looking past her, he watched the red-head gather her things, "Thisâ€|this is not going to be easy to explain."

"What do you mean?"

"I..I don't knowâ€| how to," he turned back to give her his full attention, "Buffy, we need to talk."

"About?"

He sighed, "Everything."

The slayer finished watching Willow leave before staring back up at him seriously, "I think you're right."

They gazed at each other in silence before they realized that the song was no longer playing.

"Look at that. The music's ended," her face broke into a wistful smile.

"Yes," he replied softly, "yes it has."

"Amy, where's Willow?"

"Dancing with Angel, where else?"

"Uhh..unless she dyed her hair blonde and took up wearing high-heeled boots then I'd have to vote no on that one."

The other girl glanced up. Sure enough, Willow was gone and Buffy had taken her place,
> "W-what?" she shook her head in confusion, "but she was just here a second ago." <p>

"Well she's not here now."

"Bathroom?"

"Maybe."

"We should check."

Part 21

Instead of going home, she decided to make a pit stop at the library. Even through her exhaustion, Willow knew that if she was
> going to give him his present before his birthday, she'd probably have to do it now. <p>

Although the walk from the Bronze to the school was almost 15 minutes, it'd been relatively uneventful.

Fumbling in her purse for the keys Giles had given her which led into the back entrance of the library, Willow finally found them and unlocked the door. She'd squirreled away all of the things she'd need for the spell and hid them in the less-used stacks at the back of the large room. It was odd to be there alone at night.

Flicking on a few lights, she relaxed a bit.

The circumstances were still a little too close to those which took place almost a month ago when she'd originally restored Angel's soul. Looking around the empty room and glancing out the door at the darkened hallway still gave her chills, but she knew she had to concentrate on the task at hand.

If this worked, it would be well worth it.

"So what exactly are you saying?"

"Answer the question, Buffy."

"No, I want to understand what you mean!"

"Buffy, I asked you if you still loved me. I think I deserve an answer."

They were standing in the alleyway just outside the Bronze and she was NOT happy.

"How can you ask me a question like that? D-don't you already know the answer?"

"I thought I did," he replied quietly.

In frustration she slammed her palm against the side of the building, "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you implying that I've beenâ€¦.: her voice trailed off, "Look, if ANYONE has been ignoring our relationship, it's you. You stalk off late at night, you don't like to talk to me, unless of course we're arguing and every time I try to touch you, you pull away."

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He'd had every intention of taking her back to his apartment where they could have a quiet discussion about things, but somehow it had turned into a yelling match, "Buffy, please, calm down. We need to talk ab-,"

"We ARE talking about this, goddammit. At least I am. What's wrong with you? Why won't you let me in?"

"I-I tryâ€¦it's just that..sometimes it gets so hardâ€¦"

She let out a short, angry, laugh, "Don't talk to me about hard. You weren't the one who watched her friends get hunted, her teacher get killed and her Watcher almost get burned to de-," stopping abruptly, she stared at him.

The look of pain in his eyes was almost unbearable.

Almost instantly, her tone became apologetic, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that. I-I know that wasn't your fault Angel."

He just shook his head, "This is exactly what I'm talking about."

She dropped her gaze, "No it's not. This isn't about that."

"What are you talking about?"

"You now what I'm talking about."

He grew angry again, "No, Buffy I don't."

"It's Willow, isn't it?"

"What do y-,"

"Angel, please," she begged him softly, "don't do this. Just tell me the truth, No more games, no more accusations and no more fighting," she cupped his face in her hands, "Do you love her?"

Every fiber in his being screamed to say no. It nearly killed him to see her so confused and so hurt. For all her strength she was still so fragile. The question was raw and brutal and he knew she wanted honesty but he'd give anything never to hurt her again.

>

Unfortunately, they knew each other too well. The look in his eyes betrayed his thoughts.

She broke down crying.

Holding her tightly he kissed her forehead and closed his eyes.

Her shoulders shook from the jagged sobs as she alternately clung to his shirt and beat his chest with her fists. Holding her closer, he gently rocked them both back and forth.

"Echenna arel oo-rta," Willow paused to squint at the old, faded writing,
> "Innae, wiah furdoonâ€¦fica-â€¦.fica-â€¦.fica-whozywhatsit?" In exasperation she
 stopped and picked the book up, "Geez, these people should write these things clearer.

Glancing up, she noticed that the pendant sitting before her had stopped glowing.

"Oh no. Don't do thatâ€¦" sighing she picked it up and tapped on it tentatively, almost as if it were a flashlight low on batteries, "Glow darn it, glow."

The orb thing was so much easier. The whole spell was on a computer printoutâ€¦ life was simpler back thenâ€¦ Biting her lip in frustration, she reached over the table for a piece of scrap paper and a pen, "Well, I might as well transcribe this phonetically so I can read it."

Dropping the pendant back into its bowl, she started scribbling furiously on the paper while leaning over the book. She was almost half-way through before her watch started beeping. Five minutes past the hour..time to stir the solution. She grabbed the bowl with the pendant and swirled it around in the clear colored liquid. Kinda like baking! she thought happily as she stirred away. That's when the liquid turned a strange gold color and started bubbling.

Okay, maybe not.

"She's not here."

"What do you mean she isn't here?" Xander broke in, somewhat panicked.

"She's missing."

"We need to find her. Did you call her house?"

"Yup, twice. There's no answer. Actually, you can go try that again and I'll find Buffy and Angel."

"Wait-there's Buffy."

Running through the crowd to catch the Slayer before she left, Cordelia intercepted the other girl.

"Buffy, we need your he-," the words choked off as soon as she saw the blonde girl's face.

Her hair was somewhat mussed and her clothing was wrinkled. Buffy's eyes were red and swollen and her mascara was streaked down her face.

"Ohmigosh, what happened?"

"It's nothing. What do you want Cordelia?" mildly embarrassed, she sniffled slightly and pulled herself up straighter while wiping some of the makeup off her face.

"Willow's missing."

The slayer's eyes opened wider, "What?"

"She left alone, we think. She must've gone about an hour ago and there's no answer
> at her house. Xander's calling there again and Amy went over to check on her." <p>

"We need to find her," shivering internally, Buffy sensed that something was very very wrong with this situation.

"What's going on?" Cordelia asked, somewhat surprised by the intensity of the slayer's words.

"This isn't good. Not good at all. We need to find her beforeâ€|wellâ€|.we just need to find her now."

Cordelia nodded silently as Buffy pushed past her and started for the exit, "Call Giles. Tell him to meet us at the library."

"Sure thingâ€|But where's Angel?" the dark-haired girl called after her.

Buffy didn't respond.

He stood outside her darkened house with his hands in his pockets. His heart still stung from what had just transpired with Buffy, but he knew deep down, that it was the right thing to do.

She deserved an honest answer and he needed to straighten things out between them once and for all.

Letting her go was probably one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life.

Shaking his head he leaned against the street lamp. I'll just wait for her here.

All of a sudden, a figure appeared on the porch. As in, literally appeared.

In a glittering mass of sparkles and fire Amy Madison materialized. From the frantic look on the girl's face, Angel could tell that

something was wrong.

"C'monâ€¦open the doorâ€¦open the door," the blonde teenager pushed the bell repeatedly while hopping around on the welcome mat. The bell's shrill sound could be d echoing throughout the empty house, "Damn," she muttered under her breath.

"Amy? What's going on?"

She spun around "Oh, Angel. Umm..have you seen Willow?"

His features darkened, " Not since I saw her in the Bronze. Why?"

"She's missing."

"What?"

Amy looked near tears, "She's missing and we can't find her."

"Calm down, it's okay," he replied soothing. Outwardly calm, he could feel the panic bubbling up within his chest, "We'll find her."

"You don't understandâ€¦"

"Then help me to."

"I-I've been having these..well, these nightmares lately."

His eyes narrowed slightly, "Nightmares?"

"Nightmaresâ€¦visionsâ€¦whatever. They've been getting moreâ€¦vivid not to mention violent and, well, have you ever had deja vu?"

He nodded numbly.

"Ever since she leftâ€¦I've been getting this odd feelingâ€¦almost as if I've been here before or witnessed this happen. It took a long time for me to figure outâ€¦but now I think I know what's going on."

"What?"

"Something terrible is going to happen tonight and with Willow missing...it might already be too late to stop it. "

Part 22

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This part is rated PG-13 for violent content. Feedback is always appreciated.

Firmly locking the library doors behind her, Willow smiled as she replaced the keys in her purse. If the tiny explosion which had almost singed the bottom of her hair had been any indication, the spell had proven successful. With a little luck, by tomorrow morning

> Angel would be enjoying his birthday present. Checking her watch, Willow gasped softly at the time, "Past 4am? Geez, I'd better get back home. Amy must be flipping out." <p>

Although it was usually too dangerous to walk around this late at night, things had been pretty tame on terms of vampiric activity lately. She felt that she could risk the five minute walk home.

Taking out her stake, just in case, she headed down the street and turned the corner, just missing the car that pulled into the school parking lot behind her.

Oblivious to her surroundings, she whistled happily while contemplating the look on Angel's face when he got his gift. She was positive he'd love it.

Less than two blocks away from her house, she heard a noise. Almost like a shuffling sound. Turning her head to glance behind her, something cold, hard, and metallic came in contact with the back of her neck.

Almost instantly, she fell forward, the pain lancing down her spine.

Roughly, several pairs of hands hoisted her upwards and then flung her body into a nearby alley. Tripping, she fell into the cold, wet pavement, scraping her knee against the cement ground.

Bleary eyed she looked up and saw five—no, make that six young male vampires standing around her.

"This the wench Spike told us to get?"

"Yup, see the red 'air?" one of them chuckled as he grabbed a fistfull of her locks and yanked her head upwards painfully.

"She's a skinny li'le thing, ain't she?" One of the younger ones remarked.

"Yeah, what's Spike want with 'er?" piped up another.

"She's one of the slayer's chums. She's also close with our dearly departed Angelus, so it seems."

Becoming fully conscious of her situation, Willow began struggling with the vampire who was holding her hair. She was rewarded with a quick kick to the chest which broke a few of her ribs. The pain was immense. It exploded almost instantly and melted throughout her entire upper body. Coughing up blood, she rolled over, trying to get away again. This time her captor
> just laughed and slammed her head into the pavement before releasing his hold on her hair. <p>

"Feisty whore ain't she?"

"Too bad we have to kill 'er."

"I know. It is a bloody pity. She's kinda cute."

"She'd make a good consort, don't ya think?"

"No mate, you remember what Spike said, we have to kill this one. No messing around."

"Well, I was just sayingâ€¦"

Willow moaned helplessly and tried to crawl up.

"C'mon, c'mon, let's get this done with. I think we're losing our audience," the first one smiled wickedly, "We'll 'ave to teach our guest about having better manners."

She had just managed to flip herself onto her back when she got a good look at the figures surrounding her. Much to her horror, each was carrying a long, metal pole.

"Ready boys? Now remember to put your backs into it," one of them called out.

She let out a strangled scream.

"Let's go."

All at once, the bright poles came down on her body, smashing her arm, shattering her leg and bruising her internal organs. The pain was so great that she couldn't even call out for help. It shot through her body like molten lava through her veins.

There was a brief wooshing noise as they were drawn back up and again the poles pummeled her body. She heard a snapping noise before she felt the pain of her other leg breaking. One vampire brought his pole down vertically instead of horizontally, impaling her foot and twisting it at an odd angle on the pavement. There was a second breif respite as the weapons were

> simultaneously raised and she felt her stomach contract. <p>

The poles came down again, this time, slamming partially into her face, breaking part of her jaw, and ripping a gash into her forehead. Her brain was literally set on fire from the sensory overload. Vaguely, she throught she could hear laughter in the distance, but the blood was rushing so loudly into her ears that she couldn't be sure.

She felt her mind start to shut down in an attempt to escape the pain. As her eyes fluttered shut, she felt the poles come crashing down againâ€¦and againâ€¦blood filled her lungs and she choked and gasped for air until the darkness finally claimed her. The last prayer to filter through her mind was simply for the pain to stop.

It didn't.

Giles checked his watch. 4:30 am.

He shook his head nervously and took off his glasses to clean them for what must have been the tenth time in the past fifteen minutes. Pretty soon he'd just wear a hole through the lenses.

"G-man!" Xander came running into the library, causing the Watcher to almost drop the
> book he was holding. <p>

"Y-yes, Xander?"

"What happened?" they asked simultaneously.

"Ohâ€|she's not here? You haven't heard from her?" the boy sounded distinctly disappointed.

"No," Giles felt his own heart sinking.

"We didn't find her. Cordy's still driving around, though."

"Yes, well Buffy hasn't been back yet either."

"We checked all around the bronze and the park and the yogurt shop and kinda near her house but there was no sign of her."

"Buffy is checking the sewers and the cemetery to see if she canâ€|coax some information."

"Where's Amy?"

"She just returned from checking around here and Cordelia's house. She's in my office."

"How is she?"

"Still very upset. She honestly believes this has something to do with her nightmares."

Xander nodded.

"Perhaps you should go speak to her," Giles ventured gently.

A hesitant look crossed the boy's face but it quickly disappeared, "Yes. I think I will."

> He started across the room, "Hey Giles, what do you think? Is it really possible that this is all a part of Amy's dream?" <p>

Replacing the glasses on his nose, the Watcher shook his head sadly, "I hope not, Xander," he sounded tired, "I hope not."

It was nearly 5 in the morning and Angel knew he was running out of time. The sun would be up very soon and he still hadn't been able to find Willow.

Rounding the corner a few blocks away from her house, he decided to go back to check if she'd returned.

He'd gotten about five feet down the street when he smelled it.

Blood.

The scent hit him like a wall, full in the face, so strongly that he wrinkled his nose.

What theâ€¦? Breaking into a jog, he headed towards it.

As he drew closer, his sensitive ears picked up other sounds. There was a soft, muffled scraping sound coming from nearby. Then another scent hit him.

Lilacs.

The jog almost instantly turned into a full throttled run. Rounding another corner, he swung into the alley.

And started choking almost immediately.

There, lying stretched out on the pavement, beat until she was barely recognizeable was Willow. The scraping noise was the sound of her watch as it scratched against the pavement when her hand twitched.

"Will-," he started for her, a lump growing in his throat. Suddenly he was attacked from behind.

In his haste to reach her, he had neglected the solitary figure lurking in the shadows. One of Spike's young thugs had stayed behind to make sure that the hacker would slowly bleed to death.

And now he was making the mistake of attacking a very angry, borderline hysterical Angel.

A split second after the younger man grabbed him around the waist, something deep inside Angelâ€¦snapped. With an almost animalistic scream, he lurched forward and swung his attacker over his head and into a wall.

Without even seeing, thinking, or hearing, he advanced upon the slightly stunned young man.

"Who sent you?" he bellowed in fury as he hauled him up and slammed him backwards into the wall. His face had already changed into an ugly, bony, snarl.

"Spike," came the weak response.

"Really?" Angel purred, his eyes glowing a brighter yellow, "then I won't kill you."

The other man looked relieved. That is, until Angel ripped into his throat and tore it partially out, "You can die all by yourself."

With practiced ease, he proceeded to snap both of the younger man's legs and hauled the damaged body outside into the middle of the street where he dumped it unceremoniously to the ground. This way he would either bleed to death or burn when the sun rose.

"Have fun," he spat.

Running back into the alley, Angel stooped next to Willow's broken body, "Hang in there. I'm going to get you to the hospital." He glanced at his watch. 5:02. The sun was scheduled to rise at 5:11. Carefully cradling her in his arms, he rose and started to > run in the direction of Sunnydale Emergency. <p>

"Anâ€|Angel?"

His heart leapt to his throat when he heard her speak his name. It came off like a soft squeak. He'd never heard anyone sound so tortured.

"Oh God, Willowâ€|it's meâ€|I'm going to get you help."

She managed to smile weakly before retching up blood, "Angel?" she asked again blearily, "It's your birthdayâ€|"

"Shhâ€|don't talk. Please Willow, don't say anything just save your strength and hang in there."

"Iâ€|I can see youâ€|in my head." It wasn't until then that he noticed the almost vacant look in her green eyes.

After almost an hour of severe beating, Willow was well past seeing.

He started to weep gently, his tears mixing with her blood.

"You have a really nice smile," she continued obliviously, "you should smile..moreâ€|moreâ€|..often." Gasping from the effort, her face suddenly contorted in pain, "Promise me that you'll smile more often," she gasped.

He nodded vigorously, "I willâ€|"

Suddenly she let out a high-pitched, slightly demented giggle, "It's your birthday, you know."

He shook his head helplessly, "Willow, pleaseâ€|please don't do this. Don't talk. You need to save your strength."

She gave him a peaceful smile, "Why?"

He glanced at his watch. 5:07.

"B-because I need to get you to the hospital. They're going to help you," he replied incoherently.

"Oh noâ€|they won't be able to," she smiled up at him, "I'm going to die, Angel"

"Don't say that!" he whispered harshly.

"But it's the truth," she responded in almost child-like innocence, "I feel so cold."

"It's loss of blood," he started to cut through the park.

It was 5:09.

"Don't leave me," she murmured softly, "Please, don't leave me, Angel. I feel safe with you. You'll save me." She smiled again.

He glanced down at her and knew it was true. Tears flooding his own eyes, he shook his head angrily. Willow was going to die.

In that one moment he made his decision, turning, he started to make his way in the opposite direction.

"Talk to me, Angel," she whispered, "I like the sound of your voice."

"I-I'm sorry Willow, I-I can'tâ€¦," he managed to choke out.

"That's okayâ€¦."

There were several more seconds of silence as he rushed towards the hill. Nearing his goal, he took in the view. It was a huge emerald mound which sat at the very edge of the park. From the top of it, one could see almost all of Sunnydale. Including the sunriseâ€¦

"Angel?" she asked again, her voice strangely clear this time.

He hurriedly made his way up the incline, holding her tightly against his chest, "Yes?"

"I'mâ€¦I'm sorryâ€¦."

Approaching the climax, he glanced down at her, "It wasn't your fault. You had no way of..of knowing what was going to happen. They were after me, not you. I should have warned you b-but, I just never thought.."

"No, silly," she giggled suddenly, "I'm not talking about that."

It was 5:10.

"Then what?"

"I'm sorry I fell in love with you," she replied calmly.

He just stared at her in complete shock, completely at a loss for words. Vaguely, in the distance, the first rays of light began to spread over the sky.

"Willow..I love you too."

"Oh good," she smiled innocently, "that makes me happy."

Glancing up at the horizon he felt a strange tingling sensation in his body. So this is what it feels like to die in the sunâ€¦

It was 5:11.

Gritting his teeth he stared straight ahead and prepared for the inevitable fire which would engulf them both.

"Goodbye Willow," he murmured.

And with those words, the sun broke free into the sky. Even he had to squint at its brilliance. In the 240 years he'd spent in the dark, he'd almost forgotten how beautiful it was to be in the light.

The lovely orb continued its ascent into the sky as Angel waited for his fate.

> And waitedâ€|and waitedâ€| <p>

Aside from the initial tingling which had gradually dissipated and the faint warmth of the light on his skin, there was absolutely nothing. No pain, no burns, no fire, nothing. His surprise turned to shock.

She shifted slightly in his arms and he looked down again, "Happy Birthday Angel," she sighed before her eyes fluttered shut.

And so, on a clear spring day, on top of a hill at 5:14 in the morning, just past sunriseâ€|

Willow Ann Rosenberg died.

6. part 6

Part 23

Giles sat down heavily.

5:30 am.

A little more than 3 and a half hours since Willow was last seen. He stared sullenly at the library table, too tired to be worried and too sleep-deprived to be able to think straight.

> These past few weeks had been some of the hardest of his life and just now it was beginning to take its toll. <p>

"Tea, Giles?"

He looked up to see Buffy standing over him with a steaming cup.

"N-no, no thank you," he sighed and removed his glasses in order to place his head in his hands. All my fault. Just like Jenny.

She touched his shoulder, "It'll make you feel better."

No response.

"Okay, I'll put it down right here."

Leaving the cup on the table to his left, she pulled up a nearby chair.

"We'll find her. Don't worry, Giles, we'll find her and she'll be fine."

Still no response.

"Angel isn't back yet, you know."

He shook his head without raising it. When his voice came out, it was slightly muffled, "Something is wrong. It's unlike her to just disappear like this. I-It's all my faultâ€¦if I hadn't driven her away, she would have felt comfortable in confiding in me an-,"

"It's NOT your fault!" she leaned her head on his shoulder, "None of this is anyone's fault. If Spike really did kidnap her then we'll fight him. We'll get her back."

"No we won't."

Buffy looked up to where Xander was sitting cross-legged on the floor near the window. He'd been like that ever since sunrise. Just staring blankly out the window, unblinking, unseeing and totally non-responsive. Until just now.

"What are you talking about?"

"She'sâ€¦not here," he replied dryly.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"I've known Willow for almost 17 years, Buffy. She's not here anymore," there was a slight edge to his voice as his irritation began to mount.

"Well, you're right Xander, she isn't," Buffy attempted to soothe him, "She's missing, we've been through that before. But we'll fin-,"

"No," he responded coldly.

"Wh-what?"

"I SAID NO!" he shouted suddenly, his voice cutting through the silence of the library,
> "She's NOT here," he turned to stare at her and she recognized the wild, almost uncontrolled look in his dark eyes. <p>

Grief. she realized with mild shock. He's already grieving. But why?
"Xander, you're not making any sense. Please, don't sit over there. Come here and talk to us."

The door swung open, cutting off his reply.

A leather jacket clad figure was backing into the library.

"Angel? You're back!" Buffy stood, "Did you findâ€¦Willowâ€¦" her voice trailed off as he turned around.

Giles looked up.

"Oh dear God."

**

Cordelia Chase was just coming back from the vending machine, a diet

coke in one hand and her high-heeled dance shoes in the other when she heard it.

A loud, borderline animalistic scream, which sent, shivers shooting down her spine.

Xander. That one thought caused her to fling her possessions aside and take off running down the hall, top speed. Throwing open the library doors, she thundered into the room.

The first thing she noticed was that Amy was standing in the door to Giles' office. She was kindaâ€|not moving. She didn't look sad, or angry or shockedâ€|she was just..there.

Turning her attention away from the blonde girl, Cordy scanned the library looking for Xander.

Finally, she found him, writhing on the floor and wrestling with Angel. He wasn't really making much noise beyond an occasional animal-like grunt or whine as he pummeled the vampire lying beneath him. Angel, for his part, was trying to block the incessant blows and sit up without harming the boy.

"Xander, get off of me, dammit!" he growled angrily, pinning the younger man's arms to his sides while flipping off of the ground. Gone was the previously passive and silent Angel who had last appeared in the library. Gone was the mild, shadow-like nature he had exhibited when he'd first revealed himself with Willow at his side. There was now a fire and a life to Angel, which hadn't been present before.

"Xander, get off of him!" Needlessly, Cordelia echoed the order and ran towards the still struggling pair.

As she pushed towards them, she noted that Giles and Buffy had their backs to her so she couldn't see their faces. In addition to that, they were obstructing her view of something on the table.

Instinctively, she knew not to look at whatever it was for fear of losing her nerve.

"Xander Harris, get OFF of him," she yelled while trying to pry her boyfriend away.

"I'm going to KILL you," he ground out between clenched teeth, as he broke free of Angel's grip and started swinging at the vampire again.

"Xander!" she shouted, yanking at his arm and wondering why no one seemed to be helping her to break this up.

"You killed her you damn bastard and you deserve to die."

"I didn't kill her. I'm trying to save her life, you stupid, idiotic fool now get the HELL off of me!" Angel shouted back.

Killed? Ohmigoshâ€| Unable to help herself, Cordy turned her head towards the tableâ€|just as Xander swung his arm back for another blow at his opponent.

His elbow smacked into the side of her face with a resounding crack.

That did it.

Turning her full attention back to the fighting pair, she grabbed her boyfriend's waist in fury and physically hauled him off of the ground while shoving him away.

Tears welled in her eyes from the force of the impact, nevertheless, she stared at him unblinkingly, "Xander you dumbass STOP IT!"

He stared back at her, almost as if coming out of a trance, "Cordy? Oh noâ€¦.did Iâ€¦? Cordy, are you okay?" gingerly, he reached out to touch her face and she knelt down beside him.

"Xander, what's gotten into you?"

"Willowâ€¦she'sâ€¦he brought her in andâ€¦she'sâ€¦gone," he muttered incoherently while stroking her cheek helplessly.

Gently pushing him away, she stood again and finally looked at the table, an aching dread in her heart.

When she finally saw what everyone else had been staring at so silently, she feltâ€¦nothing. Aside from a mildly cold feeling in the pit of her stomach, the body lying out on the table, with it's purplish, distorted limbs and the red gashes across it's forehead just wasn't real. There was nothing she had ever seen, living or dead, that was comparable to it. The way the bones stuck out through the flesh, or the odd angle of the footâ€¦it simply wasn't real.

But as the bile rose up in the back of her throat, Cordelia knew it was.

"Is she really dead?"

Slowly, she raised her eyes from the gory sight to see who'd spoken.

Amy hovered a few feet away from the table, the blank look still on her face as she licked her lips, "She's dead isn't she?"

"Save her," Angel whispered hoarsely. He had moved away from the Xander and the rest of the group and was standing almost directly behind the young girl.

She just shook her head wordlessly.

Gingerly, he reached out a hand and touched her shoulder.

She flinched away.

"Heal her," he repeated the request, this time taking firm hold of her arm.

There were several moments of silence as all attention focused off of the table and onto the young witch.

Slowly, she shook her head again, "I-I can't."

"No," Angel replied forcefully, "I don't believe that. Not for a second. She's your friend too and you love her. Now save her, Amy. You're the only one who can."

When she turned to face him, he saw the fear that haunted her blue eyes.

> "You don't know what you're asking me to do." <p>

"I'm asking you to heal her body."

"You're asking me to bring her back to life!" she shouted, yanking her arm away from him, "I can't do that. No one can raise the deadâ€¦not unless they've been embraced," she let out a sarcastic laugh, "Tell me Angel, as she lay, dying in your arms, did you ever think to embrace her?" she turned to stare at the table again.

He yanked her back to face him, "No, I never thought to embrace her. I'd never put her through that kind of hell. Never."

"Then there's nothing I can do. She's dead."

"Save her, Amy," he repeated the question while narrowing his eyes.

"I can't bring her back to life!!!"

"Heal her body, then!" he shouted in her face.

"It's no use," she choked helplessly, finally starting to cry.

"Why?" he demanded harshly.

Her blue eyes glowed a soft white, "Because I've looked and there's nothing," she responded, her voice breaking, "Her body is hereâ€¦but her soul is gone."

"What do you mean it's 'gone.'"

"I mean," she said, a slow, angry burn rising in her chest, "that her soul has fled her body."

Angel shook his head, unable, unwilling to believe.

Amy's anger simply grew, "Wouldn't yours if you were in herâ€¦position?"

His grip on her arm loosened slightly but he held his ground, "I won't accept that. She fought for me and now I'm fighting for her. Amy, you have got to save her."

"I can't," she repeated softly, an immeasurable sadness invading her voice, "Her body might be here and I can heal itâ€¦but without her soulâ€¦there's nothing I can do."

> <p>

Part 24

There's nothing I can doâ€¦|.. The words echoed through his head over and over again as he paced around his apartment, nearly clawing up the walls in grief and frustration.

It had been nearly 6 hours since he'd brought Willow's body to the library and if he'd had his own way, he'd still be there, sitting right alongside her. Unfortunately, after convincing Amy to mend the hacker's body, he'd been forced out of the room.

Well, in order to be fair to the witch, he recognized that they had ALL been forced out of the room. He sighed in frustration nonetheless and raked a hand through his dark hair.

Mainly, it was because her power was still fairly unstable and there were no guarantees on what would take place during the healing. They had been forced out both for their own safety as well as Willow's. It wasn't until that little fact was brought up that Angel, who cared very little about his own life, agreed to leave. Evidently ANY amount of excess energy in the room could backfire and destroy her body while she was in her weakened state.

Amy had requested eight hours of peace and he'd give it to her, but the instant the clock
> struck 2 he would be back in that library. <p>

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he put his head in his hands.

If only I knew what to do nextâ€¦| he smiled bitterly where do souls fly off to?
> If anyone should have ideas on the location of renegade souls, it was him. Unfortunately, he hadn't so much as a clue where to even begin to look. <p>

If only I hadn't gotten so close to herâ€¦|she'd still be alive

And yet, in his heart, he could never truly feel regret over their relationship. She, in that one short month, had meant more to him than anyone had throughout his entire life. And the most amazing part was how she'd accomplished it: simply being who she was and accepting him for who he was. She opened herself up to him physically, intellectually and emotionally, basically in every way humanly possible. He'd never be able to repay her for that gift. It was priceless.

Even more valuable than the ability to watch the sunrise.

He snorted at the irony of it all. It was late morning and his shades were still tightly pulled. Part of it was force of habit and part of it was the now-inextricable memories associated with the sunlight. He couldn't bear to even look at the darkened window. Not with the knowledge that outside, the world was bright and innocent and happy. It was completely undeserved. The birds shouldn't have been chirping, the sky shouldn't have been blue and the sun most
> certainly had no right to shine. It should be raining. he thought angrily Dark and stormy. Fire and grayness intertwined. It should be pouring floods and the wind should be blowing. <p>

He sighed and lay back on the black silken sheets.

If only she hadn't been seen with me. If only I'd been more careful with her. Spike would never have known to go after her. Angel raised his head. His eyes glowed a mild yellow and he bared a hint of fang at the thought of the peroxide vampire. He's signed his own death warrant. It had already been set in his mind. Whether or not Willow survived, Spike was as good as dead.

He rolled over onto his stomach and buried his head in his pillow. Even with the other man destroyed, dusted and gone, it still wouldn't heal his own heart, Angel knew that well enough. It would be many years, perhaps a whole other lifetime before that
> happened. <p>

And, although the pain would eventually fade with time, the memories never would.

He'd never forget the way she looked. The sound of her voice. The way her eyes danced when she laughed. The awkward curve of her lips when she smiled and tucked her hair behind her ears. Her modesty. Her kindness. Her intelligence. Nothing would clear his mind of any of those things.

Tears fell into the dark cloth as he recalled the peaceful expression on her face when he admitted his love for her.

At least she diedâ€|happy.

Nonetheless, it was all so unfair. All so terribly and utterly unfair. There was nothing crueler than realizing how much you loved someone too late to act upon it. And now, he'd give almost anything to get her backâ€|

"Did anyone ever tell you that you sparkle, Angel?"

The sweet feminine voice echoed through his head. Lord how I miss herâ€|

"With all different colors..almost like a kalidoscope. It's very pretty to watch."

It took him an additional moment to realize that the voice wasn't in his head.

Slowly, cautiously, he lifted his head off of the pillow, simultaneously scared out of his mind that it was only a dream and hopeful beyond belief that it wasn't.

She smiled at him. Her hair was pulled back into a simple ponytail and she was clad in a slender white silk sheath.

"Willow?" It was herâ€|and at the same time it wasn't.

Her smile widened and she nodded her head.

"Youâ€|look older." He couldn't believe it. She had been dead for what seemed like years while he'd nearly killed himself in grief and that was all he could think to say to her?

She nodded again, smiling more brightly, "Well, I am. I always was a bit older on the inside than I was on the outside. It only holds true that as a physical embodiment of who I was when I was alive, I'd look a bit more mature."

He just continued to stare at her in awe.

She giggled softly, the sound echoed oddly around the room.

"Did you know that souls are attracted to beauty?"

He sat up abruptly, his eyes widening.

She cocked her head at him shyly, "Not physical beautyâ€|but...internal beauty," she advanced towards him slowly and stopped a few feet in front, "you're very beautiful, Angel," she murmured softly.
> <p>

"Willowâ€|," he reached out to touch her just as her own hand extended towards his chest.

Gradually he felt a wonderful warmth spread over him as her hand hovered a few inches above.

She giggled, looking distinctly pleased, "The colors are dancing again!" she exclaimed happily.

"Iâ€|I don't know what to say," his voice was hoarse from emotion, "How did youâ€|why did youâ€|?"

She sat down next to him, "Why is this so hard for you to believe?" she asked curiously.

"It's just thatâ€|.you look soâ€|soâ€|.alive."

And it was true. With a sparkle in her green eyes and a vibrant blush on her face, the figure beside him looked more flesh and blood than spirit.

"What were you expecting? Ghostly whiteness and transparent light?" she shook her head, "Commercialized nonsense."

Despite himself, he broke into a grin. Deep down, he knew it was her. It was Willow in the way she'd look and act in the not-too-distant future when her young body finally caught up with her advanced mind. The way she's appear when the awkwardness and gawkiness of youth were finally shed to reveal who she really was. The way she'd never get the opportunity
> to be. <p>

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

"To say goodbye of course!!" she threw her arms around his shoulders in a jubilant hug, "And to see if you liked your birthday present!"

It was all so strange. Being hugged by her soul. Being enveloped in the very essence that was once the person he had loved so dearly. He could very well have died in that embrace and been eternally grateful

for it.

"I loved the present," he whispered into her red hair, "thank you."

She pulled away from him and an aching emptiness invaded his heart, "I'm so happy," she smiled back, "And now I have to leave." With a gentle wave, she stood up and moved away.

"Stay with me, Willow," he asked quietly.

Shaking her head, she continued to back off, "Oh no, I can't do that, Angel. You know that."

"Why not?"

"Becauseâ€¦well, because I'm dead."

"Amy can save you."

"She can't bring me back to life, Angel."

"You're right, she can't. Only you can do that. She can heal your body, though."

A sad smile crossed the hackers pretty face and she gradually started to fade out of existence, "I'm sorry, Angel. It's a lovely idea, but I'm not allowed to. They won't let me."

"Who won't let you?"

Her features were rapidly becoming indistinguishable as she glanced upwards briefly before returning her gaze to his own, "They," she repeated, a playful smile on her lips.

He shook his head in frustration, "Well tell them that they have to."

"I can't," she was almost gone, "Not without a good enough reason."

"Tell them that your friends need you."

She shook her head, "I'm sorry, Angel."

"T-tell them that you have so much good you can still do here. It isn't your time."

"Goodbye."

He stood up desperately and grabbed at her arm, only to have his hands slip through thin air, "Tell them I love you, isn't that good enough?"

A sweet smile crossed her face as she finally vanished, leaving behind a long, painful silence.

Evidently, it wasn't.

Part 25

It was 1:59 and he was standing outside of the library, pacing angrily.

It didn't matter what "they" did or said or thought, he was going to get her back.

> He was never going to give up on her, just as she'd never given up on him. <p>

In the distance he could hear the soft clicking of Buffy's boots on the linoleum as she approached the library. He still couldn't > see her, but he knew she was close. <p>

Angel hadn't heard from any of them since he'd left the library early that morning.

> The burden of Willow's death, as usual, was a solitary one. After her unexpected visit to his apartment, however, he was almost thankful for the privacy and isolation. <p>

2:00.

Not bothering to wait for Buffy, he burst through the doors eagerly.

Amy didn't seem to be anywhere in sight so he approached the central table with caution.

Willow's body was still stretched across it's surface, only this time, she looked almost normal. He breathed a sigh of relief. Beyond a few remaining pale bruises and a bandaged hand, she looked fine. Physically.

In his mind, he knew that the room was very empty. Her soul was still missing.

The door creaked open softly and he ignored Buffy's entrance while leaning forward to stroke Willow's cheek.

"Where's Amy?" the slayer inquired softly as she walked up behind him.

"I haven't seen her."

Buffy looked around, "Have you checked Giles' office?"

"Not yet," he murmured in a distracted voice as he gazed at the red-head's long lashes and slightly flushed cheeks. She looks almost as if she were sleepingâ€|

"How is she?"

The pair looked up and saw Xander standing in the doorway. Cordelia peeked over his shoulder.

"Better," Buffy shrugged

"She's still gone, though, isn't she?" the question was more of a statement as Xander came to stand grimly behind Angel.

"Still gone," the vampire sighed softly.

"Ohmigosh, Amy!" Cordelia squealed and ran around to the other side of the table.

The young witch was lying on the ground, passed out from exhaustion and partially obscured from view.

Quickly, the rest of the teenagers followed and lifted her limp body. Collectively, they carried it to a nearby couch.

"She's alright," Angel checked her pulse and found it to be satisfactorily strong, "Just drained. She'll probably be out for a while."

Gently grabbing some pillows to prop her head up, Cordy ran about making the blonde girl comfortable while Buffy went into Giles' office to call the Watcher. He was still busily researching ways in which to recall Willow's soul to her body.

Xander went back to stand beside his best friend's body and Angel wordlessly followed him.

"I loved her too, you know," the younger man said quietly.

Angel merely nodded.

"Never got to say goodbye."

"I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be."

Angel looked at him in mild surprise, "What do you mean?"

Xander paused a moment before responding, "Because at least I had a chance even though I missed it. You weren't even given that much."

Angel shook his head.

"She was a truly incredible human being," the dark haired boy said softly.

"She still is."

Xander smiled sadly and nodded before turning away to join his girlfriend.

And so, yet again, Angel found himself alone.

Cautiously, he took a seat next to her body.

Skimming his fingertips across her arm down to her injured hand, he gently placing it in his own.

Deep in his heart he knew this was it. A final goodbye. She was gone and would never come back.

His voice shaking, he started to speakâ€|

"Willow?â€|.I..I know you can hear meâ€|wherever you are. I also know you're happy and I hope you stay that way," he faltered slightly, trying to verbalize what he was feeling, "Iâ€|uhmmâ€|this is so strange..talking to you like thisâ€|.I guess I just wanted to say that I'm sorry," he chuckled all of a sudden, imagining her cautionary tone as she admonished him for his never ending guilt, "For the last timeâ€| I promiseâ€|.", he swallowed hard, "I guess I'm sorry because I waited so long to say anything to youâ€|so long to tell you what I was feelingâ€|.it's just thatâ€|wellâ€|you have this way of sneaking up on people, you know?"
> He smiled at her prone form, tears in his eyes, "You've gotta stop doing that." <p>

The others had taken notice of the ongoing 'conversation' Angel was having in hushed tones as he stooped over the table, but they chose to keep their distance.

"I mean, all of a sudden I'm thinking and..well, I realize that I'll never get to hear you laugh again. Or stand and listen to you play music from across the street. Or sit beside you while you played music, either," he smiled, "I never got to be properly introduced to your parents. Your mom and dadâ€|they meant a lot to you, I know."

He bit his lip but pushed on, "I alsoâ€|regretâ€|never being able to..wellâ€|completely share myself with you. There were so many more stories I wanted to tell you. So many ideas I wanted to..to share. There are so many things I wanted to ask you about. Like..like that time Xander tried to help you bake cookies and then caught your hair in the electric mixer and your mom had to cut it out? H-how did you feel about that? I meanâ€|did you like short hair orâ€|were you mad? Do you have pictures with short hair?" He smiled slightly, "I think you'd look pretty with short hairâ€|or long hairâ€|or no hair," again, he started laughing. This is so strange, I should be angry. I should be crying. I should be upset butâ€|I'm not.

"Or-or how about that time that Cordy tripped you and you broke your arm just before school let out for the summer?" he continued excitedly, "Were you..well, stuck like that all summer? Was it boring for you or did you still have fun? Could you go swimming? Do you like to swim?"

He licked his lips, "Or that time you snuck over to Xander's house for the first time to watch the Charlie Brown Christmas video when you were seven? What's the big deal about the snoopy dance? I mean, 10 years later and you were still doing it every Christmas. I've never seen it beforeâ€|butâ€|.if you'd gotten a chance to show meâ€|," he started laughing hard. This time the image of Willow flailing about and demonstrating some ridiculous cartoon-ish dance came to mind.

Gradually, all eyes in the library turned to the shaking vampire as he went into another fit of hysterics.

Catching their gaze, he managed to calm down, "I..I guess you get the point," he murmured softly while brushing her hair off of her face, "Of all the things I regret the most about us is that we never had an opportunity toâ€|to..well..I dunno, enjoy life together. We never got

a chance to eat a meal togetherâ€|or toâ€|watch a movieâ€|," he sighed, "I never got a chance to hold your hand or kiss you goodnight orâ€|to dance with you."

He shook his head wistfully, "We never did finish that dance, did we?"

Feeling sad again all of a sudden, he brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it gently, "I'd give anything to dance with you, Willow."

His voice trailed off as he stared at her still-immobile body. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"Angel? Giles is coming down now. He doesn't think there's anything we can doâ€|" Buffy placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, "When he gets here, we'll probably call the police..to..report thisâ€|"

He nodded dully and stood up, "Yes, that's probably a good idea."

"You're a pretty good dancer, I might have to take you up on that offer."

"What?" he turned to Buffy, a confused look on his face.

"What?" Buffy responded, equally confused, "I didn't say anythingâ€|.Angel, are you okay?"

Just as abruptly as the words echoed in his head, another sound followed.

For the first time in nearly 10 hours, Willow's body drew a ragged breath.

"Ohmigod!" Buffy heard the sound as well this time and turned back to the table, pushing past the stunned vampire, "Willow?" she shrieked at the top of her lungs while nearly pouncing atop her.

Her scream soon drew the rest of the group who immediately swarmed into the scene.

Shoving his way through the bodies, Angel emerged to the front, "Willow? Are you there?" gingerly he reached out a hand to check her pulse.

Sure enough, the hacker's eyes fluttered open, "Angel?" she murmured groggily, "Ohâ€|hi guys," she smiled up at the circle of friends which surrounded her.

Cordelia and Buffy started shrieking simultaneously. Taking tiny baby hops towards one another, they joined hands and jumped around in circles just as Giles walked in through the doors.

"W-what, on earthâ€|??" for a brief second the Watcher thought they'd all gone completely hysterical over Willow's death. Then he looked past them and saw the hacker's eyes were open and she was talking quietly to Angel and Xander.

Utterly speechless, he dropped his briefcase to the floor and ran over to the table himself.

"How are you feeling?" Angel whispered.

"A little sore" she smiled up at him.

"Does your hand hurt?" Xander prodded.

"Not that much.."

"Willow! I-I can't believe" thank God.

"Giles? Hi! When did you get here?"

>

"Just a moment ago" how did this hap-,"

"You're sure your hand doesn't hurt, rig-,"

"Hold still, I need to keep track of your pulse-,"

"She's alive, she's alive, she's alive," Cordelia and Buffy chanted while still

> jumping around, half-crying and half-laughing. <p>

"Wh-wha" the screaming jolted even Amy awake. "Why are you people yelling?" the exhausted witch lifted her head from her pillow.

"She isn't dead!! She isn't dead!!" Cordelia shouted, breaking free from Buffy and running over to the other girl. Yanking Amy's arm repeatedly, she tried vainly to get her to sit up.

"Huh?" uncomprehending, she looked around, "Alive, huh? Oh..coolness" mumbling something else under her breath, Amy calmly disengaged her arm from Cordelia, flipped over onto her stomach and went back to sleep.

Shrugging, the brunette ran back and began bouncing with Buffy again.

Willow started giggling as she watched the pandemonium breaking loose all around her,

> What the heck is going on? How did I get in the library? Why is everyone spazing? <p>

Blocking out Xander's highly persistent health questions and Giles' continued disbelief over her apparent existence, she turned her inquisitive gaze to Angel's face.

His eyes met hers and he picked up on her question almost immediately.

'Long story' he mouthed to her while grinning.

She raised an eyebrow at him and made a face as Xander poked her in the arm.

'Tell me later' she asked him silently.

He nodded vigorously in response.

And it was the truth. He'd tell her. He'd tell her the whole story from start to finish. He'd give her the details, fill in the gaps and tell her exactly how he felt about it all. How he'd always felt without even realizing it.

He watched with amusement as she fought with Xander over letting her sit up until it finally turned into a tickle fight and she was left pinned helplessly on the table laughing uncontrollably.

But then, they had time.

She darted a pleading glance at him and he rolled his eyes in mock-reprimand.

Dutifully, he 'saved' her and pulled her up into his arms. She then proceeded to playfully stick her tongue out at Xander who crossed his eyes in response. All three of them started laughing.

She turned her head back to face him and he caught his breath slightly. Although it hadn't occurred to him, Angel had never seen Willow's hair in the light before. It sparked and danced like liquid fire falling across her back and shoulders.

In that one moment, Angel felt his loneliness evaporate like magic, lost to the brightness surrounding them both. Something, he wasn't sure if it was within his soul or above his head, but something told him that he was at peace. His journey had ended. He'd found what he was looking for.

And outside, the sun continued to shineâ€¦|.

Epilogue

He knocked politely on her door before entering.

No answer.

"Willow?" cautiously, he poked his head into the room.

There she was, sitting demurely on her bed under loads of fluffy white covers, clad in a simple sleeping shirt.

"Willow?" he rapped softly on the door again to get her to respond but to no avail.

She was paying rapt attention to something on television.

Shrugging, he pushed the door open and entered her room carrying the rose.

> Closing it firmly behind him, he walked over to the dresser and placed the rose in
 the bouquet along with the others. It wasn't until he crossed in front of the TV that she looked up.

"Hey!" she smiled brightly at him for a split second before returning

her attention back to the glowing screen.

Sighing, he joined her atop the bed and kicked his boots off. She made room for him beside her and he slung an arm
> comfortably around her shoulders before looking at the TV. <p>

"What's this?"

"Charlie Brown Christmas."

"You're kidding! Where'd you get it?"

"Xander dropped it off this morning."

He chuckled to himself.

"Shhhâ€¦favorite part coming up in two seconds," she hissed.

"Snoopy's gonna dance?"

She nodded eagerly and he fell silent.

It had been almost six days since she'd come back to him and they still hadn't had their serious "talk". He had come to visit her every day, almost religiously, just to spend a few minutes with her before leaving. He kept the visits short for the most part out of respect for her parents.

As far as her parents were concerned, Willow had been mugged that night and mildly injured in the process. For that entire week, they kept her home from school. Which was a fairly good thing because she was still weak. He'd been giving her some time to recuperate but he knew that he couldn't hold off any longer.

> <p>

He grinned internally. Although it had taken some time to achieve it (about 3 hours that first day) Willow's parents absolutely loved him. Especially her mom. 'It wasn't just any boy she let upstairs alone in her daughter's room', as she'd told him herself. Raised and bred in an earlier and distinctly different era, he was truly every parent's dream. Polite, courteous, and always
> helpful, he'd made a serious effort to win their affections with wonderful results. <p>

She started bouncing up and down in time to the music, breaking him out of his thoughts. He glanced over at the television in amusement. Sure enough, the little cartoon dog wasâ€¦dancing. Or something like that.

Within a few minutes, the scene was over and he turned his full attention back to her.

She glanced up at him and smiled lazily before stretching. Scooting down lower under the covers, she lay her head on her pillow and stared up into his eyes, "So, what's up? How is everyone?"

He smiled down at her, suddenly feeling rather nervous, "They're all good. They miss you at school though."

"Well, I think I can convince mom and dad to let me go back on Monday."

He nodded, "That's greatâ€¦.ummm..Willow, we need to talk."

"About?"

"Usâ€¦."

Her smile faded slightly, "Us? What do you mean? Angel, is there something wrong?"

> Although she'd noticed that something was wrong with him these past several days, she'd chosen to ignore it. Mainly, she did so because she enjoyed his company and didn't want to lose it. Now she was scared that her decision had actually served to push him away. <p>

"Not..wrongâ€¦so much asâ€¦well, I'm not sure how toâ€¦"

She sighed softly but shot him a brave smile, "Angel, you can tell me. No matter what it is, I'll understand. Just go for it."

His eyebrows shot up and familiar roguish smile crossed his face, "You sure you want me toâ€¦go for it?"

"Yes," she nodded seriously, shifting her body to the right side and propping her head up on her hand to face him.

He touched the side of her face, gently tracing the edges of her barely noticeable bruises, "If you're sureâ€¦."

She blushed at his caress but pushed the sensations out of her mind to concentrate on the more serious task at hand, "Never been more sure in my lifeâ€¦"

"Great," he leaned forward, "But I'm thinking that instead of telling you, I could just show youâ€¦"

Here goes nothing. Tilting his head to the side, he moved closer to her and started to close his eyes. When his lips touched hers, he felt an immense spark of electricity surge up his spine.

Meanwhile, Willow's eyes were wide open. Barely able to breathe from the shock, it didn't really register in her head what was going on until it had already happened. Just as his lips brushed against her own, she leaned backwards in surprise and lost her balance, tumbling off of the bed and rolling a few feet across the floor.

"Willow!" he quickly peered down at her from the edge of the bed. She was lying flat on her stomach and her fall had caused the nightshirt to ride up a bit higher, exposing a considerable amount of leg.

His voice trailed off obviously as he took in the sight.

Noting his blatant ogling, she blushed furiously and tried to cover herself up by grabbing at a loose corner of blanket hanging off the bed.

Extremely bad idea.

She yanked the blanket with such fierce urgency that she failed to realize that Angel was still lying atop most of it. The sudden, violent motion caused him to tumble from his already precarious perch and to fall on top of her, knocking the wind out of both of them. The momentum forced them to roll further across the floor, now entangled within the white down covering.

Finally rolling to a halt, Willow found herself on the bottom with him directly above her. Her arms were pinned firmly to her sides by the blanket and her shirt had ridden up even further, almost to the top of her thighs. Not really thinking, she started to attempt to pull it back down by wiggling her arms underneath and thrusting her hips upwards to get some space between herself and the floor for better maneuvering ability.

Angle groaned softly under his breath, "Umm..don't do that."

She looked up at him innocently, "Why?"

"Justâ€¦.just don't."

Sighing, she fell back against the floor and looked up at him expectantly, "Now what?"

He started laughing and she narrowed her eyes.

"This is all your fault, you know."

He stopped, "MY fault?" he asked in outraged innocence, "If you hadn't yanked the blanket.."

"If you weren't hanging off the bed like thatâ€¦"

"If you hadn't fallen off of the bed in the first place.."

"If you hadn't KISSED meâ€¦!" she almost yelled triumphantly before realizing her parents were downstairs. Quickly she lowered her voice, blushing, "Why did you kiss me, Angel?"

The sheer directness of the question threw him for a moment before he responded, "Because I love you and I wanted you to know that." If she was going to be as candid as she was, he owed it to her to be the same way.

"When did you decide this?" she whispered softly, still not allowing herself to believe.

"Ummâ€¦.", he licked his lips, "That's a hard one. It wasn't really a conscious decision until that night we danced, I think. However, it also wasn't really something new. I feel like I've loved you for a lot longer. It didn't really surprise me when I became aware of itâ€¦"

"The night we dancedâ€¦.it was the same night I was attackedâ€¦" she said thoughtfully.

He nodded, dreading this part of the conversation.

"You were the one who found me and carried me back to the library, weren't you?"

He nodded again.

"When I wasâ€|dyingâ€|did Iâ€|say anything to you, Angel?" The fear in her voice was clearly audible even though she was obviously trying to cover it.

She's asking if she admitted that she loved me first. She thinks I'm doing this out of
> a sense of obligation or duty to her. "You..you did," he answered honestly even though he knew it was going to make things harder for her to believe. <p>

"I told you didn't I?"

"Yes, but-,"

"Look, Angelâ€|," she was fighting back tears, "I appreciate how you feel b-,"

Before she could continue, his lips came back into contact with hers cutting off the rest of her sentence.

Although she resisted weakly at first, his gentle coaxing got the better of her and she started to relax underneath him. Originally intended only to stop her from going off and saying something she would later regret, Angel felt reluctant to break it off. Very reluctant.

She whimpered softly as the kiss deepened, a strange fire building inside her.

Almost laughing in his head, Angel thought back to a time when he'd thought that his feelings for Willow weren't romantic and were much more sedate than what he'd had with Buffyâ€|.after that, all coherent thoughts pretty much fled his mind.

Unwittingly, she thrust herself upwards against him, trying to get even closer and he moaned audibly. She felt his hand slide slightly farther up her thigh to keep her down and to cool them both off but things had already gotten out of control.

Gasping, and mildly light-headed from lack of air, He doesn't need to breathe like meâ€|lucky guy. she turned her head away slightly and he continued to kiss her cheek, trailing down her jaw and then down her neck.

The blankets had loosened somewhat around them and she pulled one hand free to tangle in his dark hair when she heard it.

Uh-ohâ€| "Angel?" she hissed softly, somehow finding the ability to speak.

"Hmm?" was his muffled response.

"Did you hear th-?"

He kissed her again, blocking off the rest of her sentence. Losing

herself to the kiss, all warnings gently drifted out of her head until they heard the loud rap at the door.

"Willow, sweetie? Can I come in?"

Breaking off instantly, the pair stared up at each other.

"Ooooh no!"

Wild eyed, they simultaneously fought to get out of the blanket, not to mention their awkward position, before Willow's mother > entered the room. <p>

"Okay..okay..no," she hissed, completely out of breath and fully aware that there was no way they were getting out of this > predicament by fighting their way out, "On the count of three, we roll towards the bed, okay?" <p>

He nodded.

"One|Two|," > <p>

"Willow??" her mother called again.

"Three!" Rapidly, they went into a full fledged roll to the left. The blanket immediately loosened around them but stopped again when Angel smacked his head against the leg of Willow's nightstand.

"Ow!" he bit down on his lip to quiet his cry of pain and she leapt off of him, holding back laughter, while dragging the blanket with her.

She was on the bed and barely covered by the blanket just as her mother entered the room.

"Mom, hi!" she looked up in mock-innocence as she smoothed her hands over her hair nervously, "I didn't hear you."

"Oh, well..I knocked, sweetie," her mother paused and looked at her carefully, "I just wanted to bring you two some snacks. Your dad and I are going out to lunch. We'll be back in a few hours." Carefully, she laid the tray of cookies and milk on the > dresser before backing out of the room. <p>

"Thanks mom!" Willow responded cheerfully.

"That was very thoughtful of you Mrs. Rosenberg, thank you," Angel added meekly from his position on the floor. He was leaning against the bottom of the chair near her bed, trying to look casual while holding a book of Jewish songs and traditions he'd grabbed from her bookcase.

Willow's mother simply raised her eyebrow in response, "Oh it was no trouble at all, Angel." She smiled at him and shot her daughter one final glance. Pulling the door closed behind her, they heard her mutter, "I'd think it would be a lot more trouble reading upside down!"

In horror, Angel looked down and realized that his book was indeed

turned the wrong way. His face flushed a mild shade of pink, which was fairly impressive considering his normally pale complexion.

The comment caused Willow to burst out laughing from her vantage point on the bed, especially when she noted his rumpled clothing and tousled hair which obviously hadn't escaped her mother's scrutiny.

"What?" he demanded.

"Have you SEEN what you look like?" she asked giggling.

Darting a glance at himself in the mirror, his face contorted in agony, "Oh no!"
> Picking himself up, he sat down heavily next to her, "Your mother is never going to trust me again!" <p>

"You're right," she giggled unsympathetically.

"Thanks!"

"Oh, Angel, I'm just kidding! I mean, she didn't say anything to us right now, even though she obviously knew," Willow felt herself blushing again.

"Maybe you're right!"

"Something tells me she trusts us both a lot more than we're giving her credit for."

A smile entered his voice, "Do you trust me, Willow?"

She leaned her head back against her pillow. She couldn't see the expression on his face, but she knew he was teasing her, "Is there a reason I shouldn't?" she shot back.

"I don't know, is there?" he responded thoughtfully before turning to stare down at her.

She gasped softly at the familiar, almost predatory smile on his face. This time, though, she returned it with a dangerous smile of her own, "Not unless you show me!"

He paused a moment, a look of confusion crossing his dark features, "Show you? Show you what?"

She chuckled softly and almost purred beneath him, "Well, you know!" With an evil sparkle in her dark green eyes, she shot a lingering glance downwards.

She's got to be joking..

"Because you know, I don't have a lot of experience and anything you could show me would help!"

His smile started to fade only to be replaced by other sensations, Oh my God! is she serious? "R-really?" he asked, his mouth suddenly getting very dry.

"Oh yes, I think it's a great idea. Besides, I think I'm finally

ready," she raised a playful eyebrow at him and he swallowed. Hard.

"Willow, maybe we should discuss-,"

"What's there to discuss? We talk too much already. Let's just be spontaneousâ€|"

"W-Willowâ€|"

"Don't argue with me, Angel, let's just do it!"

He stared down at her in shock for a few moments before nodding a weak assent, "O-okay.."

Still, he stayed motionless and wide-eyed waiting for her to make the first move.

"Well?"

"Well..what?"

"Aren't you going to stand up?"

This comment threw him into complete confusion, "Stand up? Why?"

"So that you can show meâ€|"

"Oh..ummmâ€|I ahhâ€|"

"..how to dance," she finished.

His mindless babbling ceased almost immediately and he stared at her, "How to dance?"

"Well, yes."

"Oh," he looked mildly disappointed.

"Why? What did you think I was talking about?"

He shook his head, and looked embarassed until he caught the mischievous gleam in her eyes. She knew EXACTLY what he'd been thinking, "Why youâ€|"

Shrieking, she slipped out from under his arms before he could grab her and bounded off the bed, down the hall. He rolled off the other side and ran after her.

So basically, they spent the rest of the day like thatâ€|chasing eachother around the house and flying through the sunshine.

In the end, he even taught her how to dance.

> The End

Because I'm such a sappy romantic, I decided to include

> the lyrics of the song from which I got the title of this story.
> I hadn't listened to it recently until I wrote the last few parts, although there
> are some verses (2 and 4) that fit almost scarily well....enjoy!

****The One****

> by Elton John
> (Lyrics transcribed by Serendipity, so if there are any discrepancies, blame me!)

Slowly dancing out the ocean

> Running fast along the sand
> A spirit born of earth and water
> Fire flying from your hands

In the instant that you love someone

> In the second that the hammer hits
> Reality runs up your spine
> And the pieces finally fit

Chorus:

> And all I ever needed was the one
> Like freedom feels
> Where wild horses run€|
> When stars collide,
> Like you and I
> No shadows block the sun
> You're all I've ever needed
> Baby you're the one

And there were caravans€|we follow€|

> Drunken nights in dark hotels
> When chances breathe between the silence
> Where sex and love no longer gel

Oh for each man in his time is Cain

> Until he walks along the beach
> And sees his future in the water
> A long lost heart within his reach
> <p>

Chorus:

> And all I ever needed was the one
> Like freedom feels
> Where wild horses run€|
> When stars collide,
> Like you and I
> No shadows block the sun
> You're all I've ever needed
> Baby you're the one

(repeat chorus twice more.)

End
file.